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WESTERN

UTAH!

Complete New Book-Length Novel

By CLIFF CAMPBELL

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DEC 44

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BLUE RIBBON

WESTERN

Volume 7 December, 1944 Number 5

BRAND NEW "MUSTANG MARSHALL" NOVEL

UTAH! .....By Cliff Campbell 10

Settlers and peace-loving Mormons alike struggled against the insane clique of fanatics who sought to stain the land with non-Mormon blood until no outsiders remained. And Mustang Marshall found that this battle meant more than making Utah safe for all Americans—for the woman he loved had been kidnapped by the raiders.

SHORT STORIES

BULLFIDDLE AND THE BAD MAN .....By Byron W. Dalrymple 65

All Bullfiddle had to do was whistle that jinx song and trouble started.

THE TENDERFOOT CAME A'COURTIN' .....By Ralph Berard 71

The tricks they pulled on that pilgrim from the East were brutal!

THE HORSE FROM HELL .....By Kenneth P. Wood 80

The story of Satan, King of Wild Stallions.

JUDGE BATES, RAIN-MAKER .....By Lee Floren 94

"Polecats who'll maim or kill dozens of innocent bystanders just to get one man, don't deserve so easy an end as hanging!"

Cover by A. Leslie Ross *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*

BLUE RIBBON WESTERN, published 5 times a year, February, April, June, October and December, by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. Entire contents copyright 1944 by Columbia Publications, Inc. For advertising rates, write to Double Action Group, 241 Church St., New York, 13, New York. Single copies 15c; yearly subscription 75c. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope to insure return if not accepted, and while reasonable care will be exercised in handling them, they are submitted at author's risk. Printed in the U. S. A.

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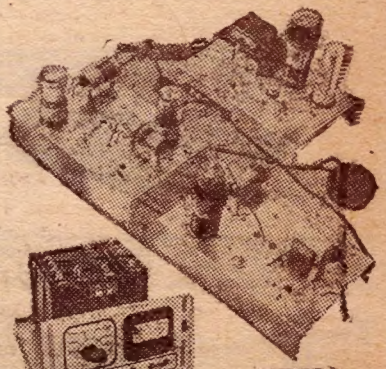

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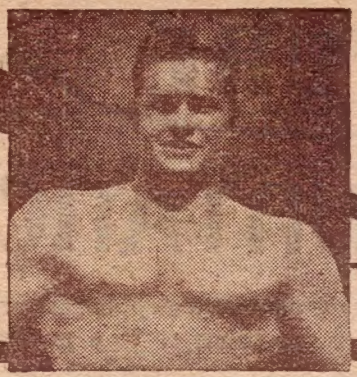

J. G. O'BRIEN

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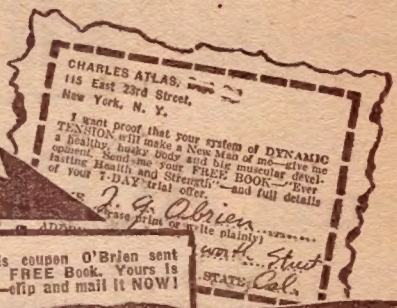

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Without Obligation to me, send full information your Whole Family Protection. No salesman will call.

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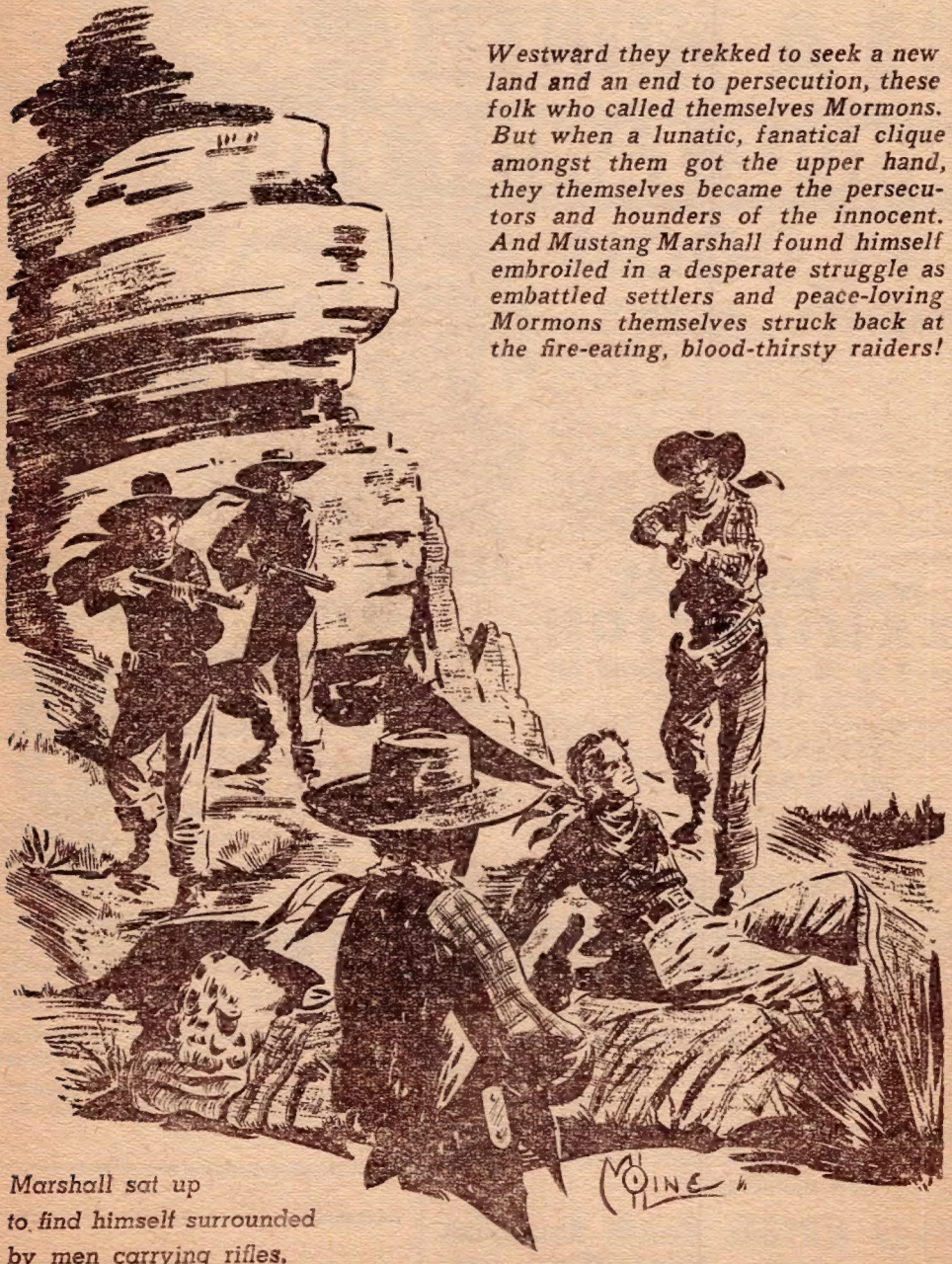
UTAH

A Complete New Book-Length Novel

A

Marshall

Westward they trekked to seek a new land and an end to persecution, these folk who called themselves Mormons. But when a lunatic, fanatical clique amongst them got the upper hand, they themselves became the persecutors and hounders of the innocent. And Mustang Marshall found himself embroiled in a desperate struggle as embattled settlers and peace-loving Mormons themselves struck back at the fire-eating, blood-thirsty raiders!

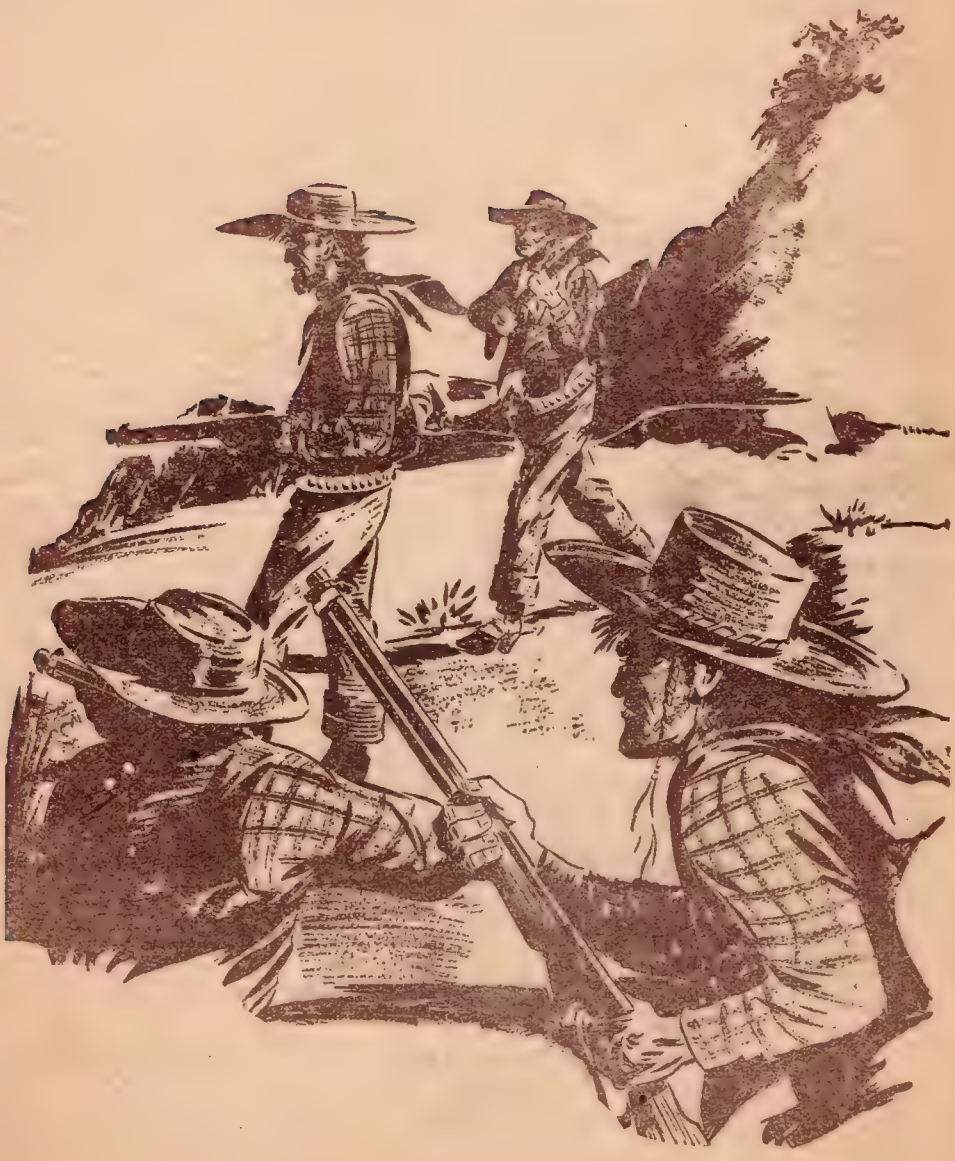


Marshall sat up to find himself surrounded by men carrying rifles.

Mustang Story

By CLIFF CAMPBELL

(Author of "Saga of Silver City," "Eagle Pass," etc.)



CHAPTER I

The Mormon Trail

A MAN and a woman, the former white-faced and panting with a curious nasally wheeze, the latter terrified and more hesitant with each step, burst through a clump of wild brush that fringed the woodlands on the eastern bank of the Ohio River.

"The river!" the man panted as they halted for a moment's respite. "It. . .it can't be far away now. Once we reach it, Hester, we shall be safe. My friend awaits us there with a boat."

"Parley," the woman pleaded. "Can't I. . ."

"No!" the man said quickly, interrupting her. "You must not even think of such a thing. You are a Mormon now, and no power on earth can change you. We must go on!"

They pushed on again presently, Parley Pratt leading the way, clutching Hester McLean tightly by the hand, his own right arm thrown up across his face to shield it from the needle-tipped brush that tore at their faces and clothes. Hester was panting now too, and there were tiny patches of crimson in her otherwise pale cheeks. Each turned continually to look back. There was fear in their faces, in their eyes, in their every movement. Soon they came to the end of the woodlands, broke into the open and trotted dog-like down the gently sloping grassy bank that led to the river. They heard a hail and Pratt looked up quickly.

"He's there!" he cried. "He's waiting for us! Hurry, Hester!"

They plunged ahead . . . the grass was thick and lush and made running difficult. Hester's voluminous skirts added to her difficulties, but she went on breathlessly. Now they came in sight of the river. There was a rowboat nosed into the grassy shore . . .on the bank itself stood a man who waved his hat vigorously, motioning them to hurry.

Now another difficulty presented itself . . . the grass was wet. Hester slipped and fell; Pratt, alert, tightened his grip on her hand instantly, fairly dragging her up again.

They were some fifty feet from the river when a great shout arose behind them. Hester gasped, twisting around to look back . . . and promptly fell again. Pratt, halting, wheeled and stared, wide-eyed. Horses' hoof beats swelled in the distance behind them, echoed ominously through the trees. Pratt gulped, released Hester's hand and fled. His wide-brimmed hat flew off his head, spun into the grass.

Now, more terrified than before, Hester scrambled to her feet and plunged after Pratt blindly. She tripped on her skirt and sprawled awkwardly on her hands and knees. She screamed when a hatless man on a lathered horse thundered past her, dragged herself out of the way as a dozen more horsemen in single file flashed by.

Shouts filled the air. With a stifled sob, Hester raised her head and looked toward the river. Parley Pratt had reached it. . .actually he had leaped into the boat. Now, standing erect as the boat moved into the current, he turned slowly, stiffly, and faced his pursuers; his fists were clenched, his face deathly white, his chest heaving beneath his velvet vest. The horsemen reined in at the top of the slope. The hatless man alone dismounted. Rifle in hand he went plunging down the embankment. The rifle flashed upward . . . it cracked with an echoing report.

Parley Pratt stiffened, a curious, awkward stiffening that made him appear to be standing on tiptoe, then he simply toppled over sideways into the water with a loud splash. The man at the oars rowing. . .he stared into the water incredulously, as Pratt's body floated downstream with the current.

THE hatless man lowered his rifle. He watched Pratt's body as the swift-running Ohio swept it away; when it had disappeared from view, he turned slowly and trudged up the bank to his waiting horse,

mounted and rode away. His companions, tight-lipped and tensed, fell in behind him. In single file again they rode back toward the woodlands, loping past the still-kneeling Hester McLean. Not a man looked down at her, not even her husband; following Hector McLean's lead, the horsemen spurred their mounts and rode swiftly into the woods.

For a lingering moment the grass-muffled echo of their horses' hoofbeats was heard; in another moment it faded away. The woodland and the river bank were hushed again. Gone, too, was the smell of gunpowder, even the crash of the death-dealing rifle. There was little now to indicate or reveal that but a brief minute before a man had been slain there.

Of all the principals, only Hester McLean remained. Abandoned by her husband to her own devices, she was completely alone. Hector McLean had avenged himself. . .Parley Pratt, the man who had converted Hester to Mormonism, and who had then won her heart, was dead. A great sob broke from Hester, a sob that shook her mightily. She covered her face with her hands.

With the departure of McLean and his grim-faced companions, Pratt's friend had instantly resumed his rowing. Now the boat skidded into the opposite bank of the river. The man leaped ashore, clutching his hat with one hand and a small leather grip with the other. He scrambled up the grassy bank, panted to the top of the incline, turned and looked across the river. He caught a glimpse of the woman, her head bowed, kneeling in the tall grass. He shook his head and turned again, followed a narrow path that wound away through tall trees. Presently he disappeared.

A great brown dog came trotting out of the woods behind Hester. He spied her, halted uncertainly, and eyed her curiously. Obviously he recognized her; however, he did not rush to her as he usually did, barking and dashing about her playfully. He had been but a week old when Hector McLean had brought him home to Hester. The dog advanced slowly . . . he halted again presently. He sniffed loudly, and barked. . . when Hester stirred, he wheeled and dashed away.

Hester raised her head. She climbed stiffly to her feet, stumbled blindly toward the river. She faltered to a stop, staring hard at something that lay at her feet in the grass. It was a wide-brimmed hat, dust and grime stained, gray now rather than black as it had once been. It was Pratt's and she recognized it instantly. She shied away from it hastily, circled it, quickened her pace as though she expected it to arise and pursue her.

Presently she reached the water's edge. The current, swifter than before, lapped hungrily and noisily at the shore. She was erect now, rigidly stiff. . .the water seemed to fascinate her for she stared down into it curiously. She stepped forward, into it, and stopped aagin. . .just as quickly she backed out of the water and onto the bank.

"No!" she said aloud in a strange voice.

The great brown dog reappeared. He came whirling over the grass, leaping rather than running, skidded to a halt when he spied Parley Pratt's hat. He eyed it for a moment, trotted back, caught it up in his jaws and scampered away again toward the river. He caught sight of Hester, and dashed after her. She heard a wheezing breathing behind her, stopped and looked back.

CURIOUSLY she saw nothing but the hat just above the grass. . . it seemed to be coming directly at her, suspended in mid-air by unseen hands. Actually the dog had shifted his hold on it from the brim to the leather band inside the hat. Hester screamed, and the dog halted; her eyes wide with fright, Hester backed into the water. The dog started forward again, and she screamed a second time, an eerie scream that echoed across the river. She stumbled, lost her balance. . .the current swept her away. Her skirts billowed out as water filled them. . .suddenly she disappeared beneath the surface.

A HORSEMAN with a dust-grimed face rode swiftly over an Arkansas road. He twisted around in the saddle when he fancied he had heard the rhythmic clatter of pursuing hoofs, listened for a moment, then, satisfied that he was not being pursued, lashed his mount with the loose ends of the reins. The horse snorted and galloped on. It was late afternoon in the drab hills and already the lengthening shadows had begun to drape themselves over the trees and boulders and over the road itself.

Joel Baker nodded to himself. Night and its protective screen of darkness would insure his safety. It would cloak him and shield him from all hostile, probing eyes; by riding all night, under the cover of darkness, he could widen the gap between his pursuers and himself, then when morning came he would be safely beyond their reach. A fleeting smile toyed at the wrinkled corners of his wide mouth. He was pleased with himself. . .he had out-witted his pursuers, outdistanced them; he relaxed, shifted himself to a more comfortable position in the saddle. Presently he permitted himself to think of other things, principally of Mary Philips.

The pretty face of a girl filled his thoughts. She was young, barely eighteen, with the flush of youth on her warm, eager lips, in her eyes, in her every movement. He had a perfect and completely detailed mental picture of her. . .he would always remember the minutest things about her. Mary had succumbed so quickly . . .at first it had puzzled him; he never knew for certain just what had won her, his fervent Mormon preachings or his worldliness.

He told himself that he had simply converted her to Mormonism, that everything else that had followed had stemmed from it without any undue pressure from him.

Neither his Church nor his associates among the Bishops and the Elders could criticize him for what had happened. He had been sent into the "field" to spread the gospel of the Mormon Church; the wagon train of converts, some seventy-eight of them including Mary, and now en route to the settlement at Penfield, attested to his powers of persuasion. Mary would await him there.

Something made him look up. . . when he did, his eyes widened and the smile vanished. Fifty feet ahead of him, in the very middle of the shadow-draped road, were two motionless horsemen. Joel checked his horse's pace. Panic overcame him. Quickly, desperately, he looked about him, seeking an avenue of escape. Then a third horseman appeared suddenly, behind him, riding out from behind a clump of brush. Joel gulped. His horse halted. The two men ahead of him came clattering toward him. . .the man behind him came whirling up.

"All right, Baker," he said gruffly. He ranged his mount alongside of Joel's. He was a big man, with leathery skin and huge hands. His eyes were pale blue beneath a shock of unruly blond hair. "Where's the girl?"

His companions rode up and reined in. One of them was old and white-haired. Joel remembered him. . .he was Mary's grandfather. The man with him said nothing, but merely looked on.

"Well?" the big man demanded. "Are you gonna tell me where Mary's at, or do I have t' beat it outta you?"

Joel braced himself. He had talked himself out of trouble before; he felt equal to this situation too, granted of course, that he would be given an opportunity to talk at will. He drew a deep breath.

"I'm afraid you're too late, gentlemen," he said with a quiet smile.

The big man inched his horse even closer.

"What d'you mean 'too late'?" he demanded.

"Mary's gone to Utah," Baker said briefly. He tightened his grip on the reins. "You see, my friend, the Mormon Church has gained a new member. At this moment Mary and a wagon train of other converts, on the way to Penfield, should be some four hundred miles from here."

THE big man's eyes blazed. Joel suddenly remembered him. . .he was Dave Coleman, Mary's cousin. He recalled too that someone had told him that Dave intended to marry her. Joel had seen him but once before. . .there had been a fight in a saloon, a man had been thrown through one of the windows, then Dave, drunk and raging, had stormed out of the place, halted on the narrow sidewalk, bared his huge arms and dared the Sheriff and the bartender to come out and fight.

"He's a bad one, that feller," someone had said behind him. "Some day that temper o' his mixed with drink will finish 'im. He'll kill someb'dy with his bare hands and they'll have t' hang 'im."

Joel remembered that he had nodded.

"Thought you were smart," he heard Dave say thickly, "sendin' her on ahead, eh?"

Dave lunged forward suddenly. . . he struck Joel full in the face. It was a murderous, paralyzing blow, and an unexpected one; Joel crumpled helplessly. Curiously and unexplainably, he did not fall from his horse.

The third man moved swiftly and purposefully now. He snatched a lariat from his saddle-horn, hefted it for a moment, and looked up at the big man. The latter merely grunted . . .his companion jerked the rope sharply. A noose spun overhead, upward, widened, whirled over Joel's bowed and dazed head, slipped down over it. The loose end of the lariat went spinning upward into a great tree that stood at the side of the road . . .it snaked over a stout, overhanging branch, then it came hissing down. The man reached for the dangling nd, caught it, looped it around his saddle-horn securely.

He backed his horse away. The rope jumped, snapped and tightened, and Joel's head was jerked upward. He choked, reached up with both hands, groped for the noose around his neck. Coleman struck him a second time, savagely, cruelly. Blood spurted from Joel's battered face.

The backing horse went on. Joel Baker was dragged from his saddle . . .he dangled at the end of the taut rope, a dozen feet above the ground, kicking and struggling in a frenzied effort to free himself. A huge hand whacked his horse across the rump and the surprised and doubtless pained animal snorted loudly, protestingly. . .when Dave's hand flashed upward again, menacingly, the horse hastily shied away, wheeled and clattered down the road. The rope creaked dismally beneath Baker's struggling body. . .it snapped suddenly, and Joel crashed heavily to the ground.

Coleman watching through narrowed, steely eyes, grunted. His right hand dropped to his holster. . . it came up again almost instantly, a Colt gripped in it. The gun thundered suddenly, mightily, with a deafening roar. . .it flamed t w i c e more. Joel Baker threshed about for a moment, then he seemed to crumple. He twitched once, then lay still.

"Awright," Dave said heavily and holstered his gun. "Come on."

The three horsemen rode slowly up the road. They clattered around a bend, disappeared from sight. Night came on presently, swiftly, and the darkness deepened and draped its mantle over the limp, grotesquely hunched body of the dead man.

CHAPTER II

Westward, Ho!

THE OPEN country spread away like a great, wave-filled, billowing sea that began in the now distant East and washed the shores of the horizon far westward.

This was no vast expanse of grassy tableland, of fragrant, gentle, breeze-swept greensward, level as the rich, lush Kansas and Texas prairies, with tiny rises here and there to give it the over-all appearance of a slightly rumpled carpet. This was the desert, the Mormon "Dixie" it had been named by some gaunt and embittered Kentuckian with the never-to-be-forgotten memory of his beloved blue-

grass country etched deep into his heart.

This was southern Utah, barren, sun-scorched and lifeless, a continuation of the trackless, waterless waste that overflowed the state line that separated Nevada from Utah, and merged in the latter state with the burning wastes of the dreaded Mojave.

Northward, blunt, rugged foothills loomed up, silhouetted against the sun-hazy skyline in mysterious, soft grey undertones. Southward lay Arizona, flat and steaming in the constant heat. The East, pulsating and throbbing with life, good living and civilization, had long since become a memory, a dream to occupy the thoughts of a tired traveler as he lay at his ease beside a flickering campfire in the cool of a desert evening.

Westward was California, the promised land, where gold awaited the opportunist and the courageous who came to wrest it from nature's bowels and claim it for his own. It was westward, ever westward, that the traveler's eyes and thoughts turned.

As the darkness deepened and cold winds swept down over the desert, the traveler drew up his blankets and burrowed deep in them. Weariness dulled his senses and presently he fell asleep. For a time he slept soundly, his dreams filled with thoughts of his home, perhaps an eastern city, perhaps of a peaceful valley in Ohio or a rich farmland in Kansas or Maryland or Minnesota. But then his dreams faded away. He stirred, tossed restlessly. . .now his thoughts were troubled.

He awoke with a start; however he lay still, giving no sign that might betray him. There was danger in the desert. . .all about him were the signs of death, the horrors of it, too. Night and the impenetrable darkness magnified them, even if only in his mind, brought them closer to hand. In that moment he recalled the human bones he had seen earlier in the day, the bits of harness and other gear strewn over the sandy wastes. . .now he felt that he had but to reach out to touch them.

Despite the oppressive stillness, despite the fact that he could hear nothing now, he was certain that he had heard a sound. In the desert, any sound at night was ominous.

He listened intently, straining his every nerve; cold sweat broke out on his face and hands. Then he heard it again, a confusion of little noises that indistinct and unrecognizable. . . the muscles in his stomach contracted and he felt weak and sickish. Fear pounded up into his throat, a strange, new fear, the equal of which he had never known before. Something flashed past him along the surface of the sandy desert floor. . .for a moment it sounded like a wind-carried echo. In the distance he thought it was the fleeting echo of human voices, deliberately low-pitched, even hushed, like panting whispers.

For one terrified moment the man's aroused imagination ran riot. . .in that moment he thought he heard sand-muffled, galloping hoof beats, the creak of saddle leather, even the stifled but nasal whine of lightning-swift horses. In his frightened mind he saw copper-skinned, loinclothed figures with tomahawks in their hands, skipping noiselessly from rise to rise, surrounding him, drawing their net tighter around him with each passing second. His imagination soared to new heights. . . the noises semed to become more intensified, then in a twinkling they were gone.

The desert was silent again. The darkness of the night seemed to soften. The stillness eased and the tensed man relaxed with a deep, thanks-giving sigh. He moved the barest bit, sank down on his back and closed his eyes. Presently, exhausted, he fell asleep again.

* * * *

MILES away, a wagon train, westward bound, had halted for the night. The wagons, sixteen of them, ranging from two-wheeled carts and cumbersome farm wagons to huge, canvas-topped prairie schooners, had been drawn up in a great, uneven circle. The oxen which were employed to haul the wagons

were simply unhitched, then left to their own devices within the confines of the circle.

Too tired and worn out to do any extensive wandering about after the long day's trek under the merciless sun, they stood where they had been unhitched, their huge heads bowed, their sweaty flanks heaving from their exertions. They seemed not to notice the milling about of a band of horses, saddled and bridled for instant use, tethered together just a few feet away. They paid no attention to the group of rifle-armed men who lounged around a bright, crackling camp-fire in the very middle of the circle.

The horses milled about aimlessly, trampling one another, backing and rearing, whining and snorting by turn. When a chilling wind droned by underfoot, lashing the sand about in short-lived fury, the horses crowded against one another, huddling together for warmth. . .when the wind died down, they promptly resumed their milling about.

Half of the men around the fire squatted down on their haunches. . . the others stood by idly. One huge man, silent in thought, knelt in the sand and tossed broken bits of dried twigs into the fire. Into the circle of light thrown off by the fire, strode a tall man. The huge man turned his head and looked up.

"Oh," he said in recognition. "Everything all right, Jim?"

"So far," the latter replied. He hooked his thumbs in his gun belt. "Luke, I don't like it. It's too quiet to last."

"Uh-huh," another man said. "Kinda gives me the jumps. Almost makes me wish somethin' would happen and make things more natural-like."

The man named Luke grunted.

"Somethin' might happen, y'know."

"I know," Jim said quickly. "And I got a feeling that somethin' will."

TWO of the men sitting around the fire climbed stiffly to their feet. Mechanically they shifted their rifles to the hollow of their right arms.

"Where you fellers goin'?" Luke asked.

"O-h," one of them said with forced casualness. "Reckon I'll go take a look at Bessie and the kids."

"Me, too," his companion said. "That baby o' mine ain't been lookin' so good and Mary's a mite worried 'bout 'er. Come on, Hank. . .let's go see if they're awright."

The two men trudged away.

"Oughta be nearin' the Mormon country soon," Jim said shortly.

Luke grunted again.

"Been in it for days," he said evenly. "Since we hit the desert."

"That wasn't what I meant," Jim said quickly.

"That's better," Luke answered. "You had me wonderin' for a moment. Thought mebbe the sun'd gotten you, too. You mean that Mormon settlement?"

"'Course."

"Be a couple o' days yet before we reach it."

"Oh," Jim said simply.

"Luke," another man said. "You aimin' to head for it direct, or circle around it?"

The big man tossed a handful of twigs into the fire.

"We're headin' straight for it," he said with finality. "We got nothing t' fear from the Mormons. They're willin' t' do business, long's they get paid, and that we aim t' do. We'll pick up the supplies we want, and mebbe a couple o' horses, if they got 'ny worth buyin', but that'll be all we'll want of 'em. We don't aim t' take sides in the fracas they're havin' with the Government, long's both o' them leave us alone."

There was a general nodding of heads.

"That's just about the way I feel about 'em, Luke," a man said.

"That's fine, Tom," Luke said dryly. "Now that we're agreed, suppose you go take a look around? You ain't been up offa your backside since we got here. Go on. . .get up outta there! Toby. . .you go along with 'im. He ain't likely to slip off somewheres and take a nap if he's got someb'dy trailin' along with 'im!"

* * *

The sand muffled the hoof beats of the big black horse and he moved like a ghostly figure, noiselessly but steadily onward into the West, a black apparition framed against the contrasting white sands and backgrounded by the over-all shadowy darkness of the night. The lithe man astride him, a black clay man who rode with the easy grace of one born to the saddle, did not press him. Neither made any attempt to hurry, despite the fact that the thought uppermost in the mind of each was an unqualified desire to get out of the desert with the least possible delay. However, both knew that to attempt to "make time" in the sun-scorched wastes was both futile and suicidal.

The desert sun had taken its toll of them, too, but because they had paced themselves wisely, neither one of them showed any signs of wilting. Doggedly they went on. . .to them the desert and the merciless sun were simply foemen, antagonists to be faced without flinching and fought right down to the bitter end. They had fought before, against men, beasts, against the elements. That they were still alive and still together was a tribute to their courage and to their fighting instinct and ability. Neither entertained the slightest doubt as to the outcome. They would prevail in this fight, too.

The black whinnied softly, and halted. It was a warning to his rider and Marshall, on the alert, looked up quickly. The veil of darkness hampered him. . .he could see nothing. He listened intently. Somewhere beyond him in that vast darkness he could hear something, a definite but indistinguishable sound. He straightened up in the saddle presently, shifted his twin holsters a bit. . . it was a purely mechanical, even unconscious action, preparing his guns for instant use should the necessity and the occasion arise.

HE HAD long since learned the law of the range. . .it was man-made and it contained but one proviso. . .the man who was always prepared to defend himself was entitled to live the longest. It was as simple as that. He nudged the black with his knees, and the big horse went on again.

It was probably half an hour later when Marshall glimpsed the glow of a camp-fire. The black needed no cautioning. . .he, too, was well-versed in the ways of the West; he was alert and watchful, and sensing the nearness of an encampment, he seemed to take particular pains to avoid making even the slightest sound that might betray them or forewarn others of their approach. Soon, as they came closer, the tall frames of prairie schooners loomed up in the night light.

Then they saw the camp-fire, a bright, cheerful fire that blazed noisily in the middle of a circle of prairie wagons. A handful of men were standing around it . . . beyond them were three or four women, drab, silent figures with shawls around their heads. The air was still filled with the savory goodness of cooking. Even the black showed interest. . . he raised his head and sniffed loudly. Men whirled around. . .the women quickly backed into the shadows thrown off by the big wagons. Marshall rode through a gap between two wagons and halted just inside the circle.

"Evenin'," he said.

Hostile, appraising eyes looked up at him, ranged over him, then over the black horse. Half-raised rifles gaped at him, warningly and threateningly. He pretended not to notice them. He shifted himself in the saddle, easing himself a bit, kicked his feet clear of the stirrups, pushed his hat up from his eyes. Watchful eyes opposite him followed his every move . . .he was careful to keep his hands in full view, away from the jutting butts of his guns.

"Saw your fire as I came along and headed straight for it," he went on. He grinned suddenly, boyishly. "Gets mighty lonesome out there, y'know, when you've got nobody to talk to or even look at. Hope you folks don't mind me bargin' in on you like this."

There was no reply. No one moved. . .finally a man with a rifle in his hands on the far side of the fire grunted, spat into the flames and came around them.

"Which way you headed, Stranger?" he asked.

"Westward."

"Westward where?"

"California."

"Uh-huh. The law after you?"

"Nope."

The man eyed him for another moment.

"Awright," he said finally, and lowered his rifle. "Get down."

"Thanks," Marshall said simply.

He swung out of the saddle to the ground, shifted his holsters back to his hips. The man, watching for another moment, turned and motioned to one of the women. She came forward at once, swiftly, picked up a tin cup and filled it with hot, steaming coffee from a huge, battered, smoke-blackened pot that stood atop a flat, scorched stone. She came erect, looked at Marshall, then at the man with the rifle. The man frowned . . .the woman handed him the cup, wheeled and retraced her steps.

"Here, y'are, Stranger," he said.

"Oh. . .thanks."

Marshall took the cup from him, raised it to his lips. The coffee was hot. . .and good. . .and he drank it slowly. Out of the corner of his eye he looked at the man, then over at the women. The one who had poured the coffee for him drew her shawl around her. Marshall drained the cup and handed it back gravely. The man took it and tossed it on the sandy ground behind him. His eyes hovered over the brace of heavy Colts in Marshall's holsters.

"You folks headed for California, too?" Marshall asked.

"We're bound for Penfield."

"Where? Oh, yeah. . .ain't that the Mormon settlement?"

"Yep. We live there."

"Oh, I see!"

The man turned. . .he gestured authoritatively with his right hand and two of the women standing in the shadowy background turned without a word and trudged off. The third woman in the group did not move.

"Dora!" the man said sharply.

"Please," she said in a low-toned voice that was surprisingly youthful. "I don't want to turn in yet. I'm not tired. . .really."

THE man scowled. He started toward her. . .she turned slowly, her head bowed; she tramped away into the darkness beyond the rim of light from the camp-fire. The man halted. . .he watched her for a moment, then retraced his steps. Marshall's eyes followed her. He saw her stop in front of a shadow-draped wagon, saw her climb up to the driver's seat, then she disappeared within the wagon's canvas depths.

"Never been out this way b'fore, have you?" he heard the man ask.

Marshall turned to him

"Nope."

"That's what I figgered. Mormons don't like strangers eyein' their women-folks."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean 'ny offense."

The man grunted.

"Reckon you'd better get goin' again, Mister."

"Awright."

There was a muffled cry from within one of the wagons. Marshall stiffened. . .the man with the rifle froze. Their eyes met. Marshall turned away, reached for the bridle, climbed up into the saddle. There was a sudden stiring beyond the range of the camp-fire. . .from out of the shadows came a runing, stumbling, sobbing woman. It was Dora. Another woman appeared suddenly . . .she reached out as Dora came abreast of her, caught her by the arm and swung her around. They struggled for a brief moment. . .it ended abruptly when the woman who had intercepted her, slapped her, swarmed over her, gripped her by the wrist and dragged her away.

Dora cried out again. . .the rifle in the man's hands came upward. Its muzzle gaped at Marshall's chest. The other men who had drifted away from the fire and who had stood by

in silence, edged forward a bit now. Their rifles too came up.

Marshal wheeled the black. He rode out of the encampment through the gap between the two wagons.

CHAPTER III

Penfield

THE desert with its burning, clinging sands emitting a curious swishing sound as the black plodded through it, ended with surprising suddenness at the very base of a range of low foothills. It seemed odd to step from the vast sandy stretches onto solid ground again; it was a delight to find grass, even tiny, fragrant flowers, dotting the sides of the hills. The air, too, was a revelation, clean and fresh and so completely unoppressive and lacking in stifling, choking heat. Both horse and rider breathed deeply and luxuriously. But they did not halt there; they spied a trail close by that wound upward into the hills, and they followed it to the very top of the trail, then the black stopped of his own accord.

They found themselves at the entrance to a narrow, walled pass. They rode through it. . .the black's iron-shod hoofs rang out sharply on the stone and shale. Thirty, forty feet, and they were through the pass. . . They emerged again into the open. Below them lay a green, fertile valley, and in the very hollow of the valley was a village.

"Penfield," Marshall muttered.

He eased himself in the saddle. His eyes ranged over the village. There were orderly rows of houses. . .actually they were little more than ordinary, unpretentious cabins; however they were far different from those of the typically western towns that lay on the other side of the desert. They glistened in new, fresh paint. . .from all appearances they were well-kept. He could see tiny lawns and equally tiny gardens, green roofs and white shutters and fences.

It was like another, newer world. The houses, he noted seemed to stem off a wide square in the very middle of the village. There was a taller structure in the square. . .a church . . . and a metallic piece at the top of its single steeple gleamed brightly in the sun.

He nudged the black and the big horse went on again. There was a trail directly ahead of them, and it dipped downward sharply. Then finally they were on level ground and the black's surliness vanished.

The fragrance of fresh, young grass, and the overpowering sweet breath of budding flowers enveloped them. The black drank it in noisily. He loped away shortly and the ground fell away behind them. Presently they were on the fringe of the village. Closer they came. . .a line of washed underclothing, flapping in the gentle breeze, frightened the black and he shied away from it hastily, circled it and came whirling onto a narrow, dirt street. Marshall quickly slowed him to a walk.

There was a curious sameness about the houses, but each bespoke rigid and painstaking cleanliness. There were crisp, starched curtains behind polished windows and blinds drawn with measured evenness; the small porches and the narrow walks that led from the gate to the porch steps had been swept clean. The tiny, squared lawns in front of each house were neatly cropped. . .circular mounds of flowers occupied the center of each lawn.

A boy of three or four came to a gate midway along the street. He looked at Marshall curiously, and when he dared a timid and rather reserved wave of his chubby little hand, Marshall waved back at him. The front door of the next house opened and a woman, broom in hand, appeared. She looked up when she heard the black's hoofs; when Marshall glanced at her and touched his hat, she colored, wheeled and quickly went back inside.

NOW two mounted men appeared. They slackened their horses' pace when they caught sight of him, eyed him questioningly when they came abreast of him, nodded gravely and rode on. When they had passed

him, they twisted around and watched him for a moment, then they spurred their mounts and galloped away. A brown-and-black dog came dashing around the corner, darted into the gutter, barking and snapping at the black's legs.

The big horse snorted and the dog whirled and fled for its life. It reappeared shortly, still barking, but this time it made no attempt to leave the comparative safety of the wooden sidewalk. After a time it abandoned its "pursuit" and dashed through an open gate along the way and scampered off.

The street, as did all the others in the village, converged upon the square. Marshell came to it presently. The tall structure, as he had expected, proved to be a church. It occupied a plot in the very center of the square. Well trimmed lawns surrounded it on every side. . .narrow, stone walks, four of them, led to its double doors. There was a store and a school on two of the corners; Marshall guided the black toward the store and pulled up in front of it, dismounted and sauntered inside.

It was small but its single counter was clean and its shelves were orderly, in full keeping with Penfield itself. A tall man with a solemn face, spectacles, greying hair, and an alpaca coat that he wore fully buttoned and that reached to his knees, came forward. He eyed the black-clad man for a moment. Marshall smiled inwardly. Curiously the man wore no shirt beneath his coat.

"Howdy," Marshall said.

The man nodded.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked.

Marshall leaned back against the counter. He pushed his hat up from his eyes.

"Got 'ny shirts?" he asked. "Black, and man sized."

"Yes, of course."

The storekeeper turned, came around the far end of the counter, bent down behind it. He straightened up again presently, placed a long, cardboard box on the counter, removed the lid and looked up.

"Five dollars each," he said simply, without enthusiasm.

Marshall glanced at the shirts in the box; his eyebrows arched.

"Five bucks a piece?" he echoed incredulously. "What are the buttons made of. . .gold?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"No. However, that's the price. Incidentally, this is the only store in town; for that matter, there isn't another within fifty miles. How many, please?"

"One," Marshall snapped and tossed five silver dollars on the counter. "You're a danged robber, Mister. Wrap it up!"

The storekeeper did not reply. He hunted behind the counter for some wrapping paper, came erect again, and shook his head.

"No paper, eh?"

"Sorry."

Marshall frowned.

"You're awright. At these prices, you'll die rich."

The man smiled.

"I doubt it," he replied. "Ordinarily, our prices are quite reasonable. I sell these shirts regularly at two and a half dollars. That leaves me a small margin of profit."

"Yeah, but how come five bucks f'r me?"

"We double our prices to strangers, and the extra charge goes to the church."

"Wa-al, that's what I call bein' downright hospitable," Marshall said gruffly.

"We don't try to be," the man said simply. "We're Mormons and we try to live our lives as we please. Strangers come here out of curiosity. We purposely overcharge them in order to discourage their returning."

Marshall caught up the shirt, jammed it under his arm. He gave the unruffled storekeeper a cold stare, turned and stalked toward the door.

"Oh, yes," the man called after him.

Marshall halted and looked back.

"You'll probably find your horse gone when you get outside," the man continued. "There's a tolerance tax of five dollars for unstabled horses, and five dollars additional for each

day that we have to board the animals. I'd advise you to pay it now."

Marshall's lips curled.

"This is one helluva town!" he said angrily. He dug into his pocket, produced a small canvas bag, drew a gold piece out of it and tossed it on the counter. "B'lieve me, I'll stay away fr'm it fr'm now on. Trot out my horse!"

The man shook his head.

"I'll take another five dollars, please. Board for your horse started the moment he was led into the village barn."

* * * *

MARSHALL rode swiftly down the street.

"Danged thieves," he muttered to himself. 'The next time I run into a Mormon, doggone if I don't peel the hide off 'im just to get square!"

He forgot his resentment when he heard approaching hoof beats, and looked up quickly. . .presently he heard the louder, heavier rumbling of wagon wheels. When he reached the end of the street, he spied the lead-wagon of a long line of prairie schooners coming into town. He frowned with annoyance, guided the black over to the very edge of the gutter, slowed him down, and finally halted him altogether.

A lone horseman came loping up along the line of wagons. . .Marshall recognized him at once. It was the man who had given him the cup of coffee in the Mormon encampment . . .the same man who had later ordered him out. Their eyes met again, and clashed; beyond that neither man gave any sign of recognition.

"There's one polecat I'd like to tangle with," Marshall muttered.

He turned, watched the man clatter away. Wagon after wagon rumbled past . The men on the wide driver's seats glanced at him, but that was all. Women and children appeared in the doorways of their houses. . .they eyed the incoming cavalcade with interest. Then the last wagon came along. It rumbled abreast of the black clad horseman, then it was past him. The canvas flap at the rear of the wagon was suddenly lifted. . .a white face appeared. It was Dora's. She tossed something at him and he threw up his hands mechanically, caught it and looked down at it in surprise, then he raised his eyes again. In that brief instant the flap was dropped and the wagon trundled away. Marshall frowned. He stared at the object in his big hands. . .it was a tiny, compact wad of paper. He was tempted to open it. . .he reconsidered, and shoved it into his shirt pocket, spurred the big horse and sent him galloping out of town.

When he was safely out of range of prying eyes. . .he had the feeling that there were many of them watching him continually. . .he opened the wad. There was an outer wrapping, and a tiny ball of paper within it. He smoothed it out. It was a note, a briefly worded, pencil-written note.

"Please help me!" it read.

Marshall grunted. He read and reread the note. There was no signature to it, nothing beyond the brief and hastily scribbled message.

"Please help me!"

He studied it for another moment . . .he finally crumpled the wad in his hand and threw it away. He settled himself in the saddle, gave Penfield a backward look over his shoulder, nudged the black and rode off in a westerly direction. The black was evidently just as eager to put distance between Penfield and himself as Marshall was for he swept over the ground at a swift pace. Mile after mile flashed away behind them, with Marshall hunched forward in the saddle, his face a study. He tried hard to forget his experience in Penfield, tried to forget the Mormons, that he had ever met any of them, tried too to forget Dora, that there was such a person. But despite his efforts the face of the man who had ordered him out of the encampment reappeared, then the storekeeper, and finally Dora. Marshall scowled, turned his head as if he could thus elude them, but there was no escape, particularly from Dora.

He tried to turn his thoughts to

California, fought with himself to concentrate his thoughts there, but it was unavailing. Finally, overwhelmed and overpowered, he surrendered, shook his head. Actually he had known all along what would happen, and now it was happening. . . he was going back to Penfield. He jerked the black to a skidding stop. . . the big horse snorted, his own particular way of expressing his annoyance.

"I know," Marshall said to him. "I know you figger I'm plumb loco for goin' back there, but doggone it, what else can a feller do? Huh?"

He wheeled the black.

"You know danged well that those two Mormon polecats made a sucker outta me and that I'm itchin' f'r a chance t' pay 'em back," he went on. "Awright then. . .here's the chance. If helpin' Dora'll do it, swell. Anyway, the way I see it, it's worth havin' a go at and that's what I'm doin' "

THE black snorted again, scornfully.

"Awright, awright," Marshall said gruffly. "That'll be enough outta you. You just stick t' your knittin' and leave the rest t' me. And if I get plugged f'r what I'm gonna do. . . what of it? It won't be your funeral . . .it'll be mine. Go on now. . .get goin' and stretch them legs o' yourn."

The black obeyed. . .he loped away, quickened his pace, and really "stretched his legs." They raced through the beautiful valley, back toward Penfield. They came abreast of it, veered off sharply and halted finally, about a mile south of it. Marshall dismounted, unsaddled the black.

"Now keep your shirt on," he said to the big horse. "We're on'y gonna be here 'till it gets dark, then we'll hightail it. Think you can stay put here that long?"

There was no response from the black.

It was evening, a cool, moon-lit and star-bright evening when they returned to Penfield. The village was sleepily quiet. The street itself was completely deserted. There were dimmed lights in some of the houses along the street. . .others were totally dark.

Somewhere beyond him, Marshall heard a dog bark; almost instantly he heard a man's stern, rebuking voice, then the hushed stillness prevailed again. He slowed the black. . .the big horse's hoof beats echoed the length of the street like a bell.

They rode into the square. . .there were lights in the church; they loped past the store. It was closed now and Marshall scowled when he thought of its owner. They swung through the square, circled the church, rode into a street that ran northward from it. The wagon-train, he was confident, couldn't be very far off; in all probability he would find it halted for the night on the outer fringe of the village.

Then he spied it...the tall frames of the lumbering prairie schooners silhouetted darkly against the blue sky. He saw a large group of dark figures, women as well as men, striding down the shadowy street, evidently bound for the church. He reined in, wheeled the black, spurred him and sent him clattering away. They reached the square again and rode up still another street. He had already planned what he would do. . . he would follow the street to its end, swing out of town, then circle back and reach the wagon-train from the rear.

Then a disturbing thought came to him. . .what if Dora was among the church-goers? He considered that possibility for a moment, finally decided that he would have to assume that she was still in her wagon. If she wasn't, we-ll, he'd make other plans if she wasn't there.

He whirled the black sharply when they came to the end of the street, swung off toward the wagon-train. . . they caught sight of it again shortly and he pulled up and dismounted.

"Stay here," he said simply and the big horse whinnied softly, understandingly, in reply.

Marshall strode away. The night light had deepened a bit now and he was grateful for it. His black garb,

blending with the natural darkness, cloaked him. Swiftly and noiselessly he went on. He froze in his tracks when something scampered across his path. . .it was a rabbit, he decided presently, and he plodded ahead. He reached the last wagon in the line, came up to it from the rear. . .he bent low and listened. There was no sound from within it.

Stealthily he slipped around it to the next wagon, listened there too. There was no one in it, he soon decided, wondered too if all the wagons were vacant. At that moment he spied a tiny, yellowish light seeping through the frayed canvas flap of the wagon ahead. He backed up, flattened out against the huge rear wheel when he heard an indistinct voice and an answering, though equally indistinct reply. Now he heard a creaking . . .evidently someone was descending from the wagon.

THE figure of a woman appeared. He eyed her questioningly. . . she came closer, slowly, saunteringly. He would have to take a chance; he drew a deep breath. She came abreast of him.

"Dora!"

She halted abruptly, looked up quickly.

"Y-yes?"

He stepped forward now.

"Oh!" she said breathlessly. She came up to him eagerly. "Then you did come!"

"You wanted me to, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course!" she whispered excitedly. "I'm so grateful to you!"

"Better save that 'till I've done somethin' for you. Who's in that wagon?"

"My mother."

"Your mother?" he repeated in surprise. Suddenly he remembered the woman who had slapped Dora. . .he wondered if she were Dora's mother. "Then. . .then what's this all about? What d'you want o' me?"

"I want to get away from here, from the Mormons."

"Uh-huh, but what about your mother?"

"She's a Mormon, too; that is, she's been converted."

"I see."

"I came here with mother from Ohio. You see, we're all alone in the world, and we've never been separated, and I couldn't let her come out here by herself. But I never intended to renounce my faith for Mormonism."

"Go on."

"We-ll, Mother simply refuses to believe that I haven't accepted Mormonism, too, and she's arranged for me to marry Bishop Gould."

"And you don't like the idea, eh?"

"No!"

"Awright. Now what d'you want me t' do. . .just help you get away somewheres?"

"Yes," she said simply. "Anywhere at all."

"You're sure desperate if you're willin' to take a chance on a stranger."

"I've got to get away from here or I'll. . ."

"You ready t' go now?"

"This very minute!"

He shrugged his shoulder. He stopped, looked at her sharply. He hadn't thought of it before. . .actually he hadn't fully realized just what helping her might imply. Now, the idea of saddling himself with a girl he'd seen but twice before, and then but briefly each time. . .he rubbed his chin reflectively. What would he do with her?

"Dora!" a woman's voice called.

The girl's hand tightened on Marshall's arm.

"Mother!" she whispered.

"Then we'd better get goin'," he replied. "Come on!"

Together they raced away into the night.

CHAPTER IV

Mormon Law

DAWN came into being with a startling suddenness, with a chilling breeze sweeping ahead of it, driving away the waning night and its lingering veil of grey, thinning darkness. The veil was lifted and whisked away and the valley stood out again in bold relief,

awakening in that first faint light of the new day. The black whinnied and Marshall stirred, rolled over in his blanket and sat up. He yawned, blinked and rubbed his eyes, checked another yawn and stared hard, unbelievingly.

Eight men with rifles in their hands stood around him in a crude circle. His eyes ranged over them. He had never seen any of them before. One man. . .a tall man with black, hostile eyes and a thick black beard stood closest to him with the others probably a step farther back. Marshall's eyes swept past him. . . Dora, completely blanketed, lay quietly asleep.

"Get up!" the bearded man commanded.

Marshall kicked off the blanket, climbed to his feet. A man came up behind him, a pair of rough hands unbuckled and whipped off his gun belt. Another man, snatching away the blanket, came erect with Marshall's rifle in his hand. The man behind him shoved him hard and Marshall stumbled forward awkwardly. He went down on his hands and knees, forced himself up again when three other men at a nod from the bearded man threw themselves upon him.

Marshall was swept backward; his fists lashed out viciously and thudded home but his attackers swarming over him, brought him down again. He drove his booted foot into a blood-smeared face, then he was overpowered. His wrists were lashed together and he was dragged to his feet. The black, a bit puzzled, came forward now, slowly and uncertainly. Marshall, still struggling, kicking but futilely, was dragged, then carried to where the big horse halted. His bound wrists were hung over his own saddle horn.

"Wilkins!" the bearded man said gruffly.

Rough hands tore at Marshall's shirt, ripped it down the back. He heard a sudden scream somewhere behind him, evidence that Dora had awakened, but he was powerless to do anything about it. His flannel undershirt was torn away too.

A whip cracked and hummed with a curious, whining sound. . .it cut cruelly into Marshall's flesh. His head was driven against a toughened, unyielding stirrup. Again the whip hissed and bit into him, agonizingly. He straightened up, turned halfway. The descending whip lashed him and spun him around and hurled him drunkenly against the frightened black.

The big horse screamed and tried to back away, but strong hands clung tightly to his bit and held him fast. Again and again the whip cracked with its pistol-like report, hummed and curled hungrily around Marshall's waist and torn back. A half-stifled sob broke from him. . .the whip lashed him again and he slumped to his knees.

"That's enough!"

The whip halted in mid-air. Marshall was lifted to his feet, steadied, then hoisted astride the black. He tottered helplessly, almost tumbled out of the saddle. Mormon hands reached up and pushed him face-downward against the black's neck. The big horse was wheeled. A rough hand whacked him across the rump and the black shied away hastily. A rifle, pointed skyward, roared with frightening suddenness. The black bounded away.

IT WAS Luke Hanley, riding ahead of the wagon train, who first spotted the approaching black and his insensible burden. Luke had halted the train earlier. . .alone he had ridden through the Pass; finding it unsuited for passage by his huge, heavy wagons, he had retraced his steps, ordered the train to wait, then he had galloped off southward. Half an hour later he had returned to guide his charges to a more negotiable entrance into the valley. Now, having halted his horse atop a rise that commanded a fairly good view of the valley, he watched as the heavy prairie schooners came rolling through a wide, level-ground break in the foothills.

He eased himself in the saddle,

breathed a deep sigh of relief. The most dangerous part of the journey was over. He was pleased with himself; he had brought the train safely through the desert with negligible loss, a single wagon and a horse. He straightened up presently, wheeled his mount. . .his eyes, ranging over the fertile fields, focused on the oncoming black. Luke eyed the big horse; he twisted around suddenly, cupped his mouth with his hands and yelled. Jim and Toby, riding alongside the lead wagon, promptly spurred their mounts and came racing over the ground to his side.

"What's up?" Jim asked.

"Dunno," Luke replied and pointed. "What d'you make o' that?"

His companions stood up in their stirrups and looked hard and long.

"I wouldn't want t' say f'r sure," Jim began shortly, "but ain't that a man sprawled out on that big black's back?"

"That's what it looks like t' me," Toby said. "I wasn't sure 'bout it, that's why I didn't say so right off."

"'Course it's a man," Luke said with a trace of impatience in his voice. "Offhand I'd say he'd been plugged."

"Uh-huh," Toby said. "Might even be dead."

"He might," Luke said. "But dead or alive, sittin' here and jawin' about it ain't half as good as goin' over and seein' for ourselves. Come on!"

He drove his spurs into his horse's flanks, sent him leaping away. Luke's companions came thundering along behind him. The black had halted . . .now he looked up and watched as the three horsemen came riding toward him. They hurdled a tiny ditch, swung wide around a clump of wild berry brush, came up to the waiting black at a full gallop, pulled up sharply and circled him, then closed in on him. Luke and Jim swung out of their saddles. Toby alone sat his horse. The torn, forlornly hanging shirt caught their eyes. . .carefully Luke drew it back.

"Good God!" Jim said in awed tones. "Lookit that!"

Luke's face was grim.

"He's been whipped," he said simply.

Toby edged his horse closer; he bent down from the saddle.

"Looks more like he's been clawed," he said. "No ord'nary whip coulda done a job like that."

"Toby," Luke said authoritatively. "Go back and get that lead wagon t' come over here so's we c'n load this feller aboard 'er. Make it snappy and tell the others t' wait."

Jim straightened up.

"He's alive awright," he announced.

"'Course he is," Luke said sharply. "I saw that the minute I looked at 'im."

"Wait a minute," Toby said quickly. "There's somethin' doggoned f'miliar 'bout this feller. Jim, hold his head up, will you?"

Luke eyed him.

"Think you know 'im?"

"There y'are, Toby," Jim said. "Reco'nize 'im?"

Toby's lips tightened.

"I'll be doggoned!" he muttered.

"Wa-al?" Luke demanded.

Toby nodded grimly.

"His name's Marshall," he answered. "He's a lawm'n. What's more he c'n throw a six-gun like nob'dy I ever saw. On'y diff'rence b'tween him and greased lightnin' is that he deals out hot lead 'stead o' thunder."

"A lawm'n, eh?" Luke muttered. "Go 'head, Toby. . .go fetch that wagon!"

TOBY wheeled his horse, spurred him and clattered away.

"What d'you make o' this?" Jim asked presently.

"Dunno," Luke answered.

"This gonna interfere with us headin' straight into that danged Mormon town like you were figgerin' on doin'?" Jim asked.

"I'm askin' myself the same question," Luke answered.

"And?"

"Wa-al, bein' that we got women and kids back in them wagons, we ain't 'ny right to take chances with their lives. Mebbe it'd be smart f'r us t' stay the hell away fr'm Penfield f'r a spell, leastways 'till this feller

. . .s-ay, what'd Toby say his name was.

"Marshall. But what were you gonna say?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Jim, the way I figger it out, this feller. . .this Marshall. . .wa-al, I got 'n idea he's been tanglin' with them Mormons. Now ord'narily they're peaceable enough . . .fr'm the looks o' Marshall's back, somethin's stirred them up. Mebbe they're after everybody's hide, ours too. 'Till we know f'r sure that it's safe f'r us t' go near them, we're gonna give them a wide berth, like Penfield was full o' plague."

Jim nodded understandingly.

'That makes sense t' me. Reckon then the best thing we c'n do is pitch camp and wait. That the idea?"

"Just about. But we won't hafta wait too long. This feller'll come to soon enough, mebbe in a couple o' hours, then we'll know whether t' hightail it away hell bent f'r election, or head f'r Penfield."

* * * *

The man who lay so motionlessly on the blanket-covered floor of the wagon stirred briefly. Actually, it was more of a twitching of leg and arm muscles than a stirring. . .he moved presently and his eyelids fluttered; now his eyes opened. Luke, squatting on his heels beside him, bent over him quickly, grinned down at him.

"That's a good feller," Luke said cheerily. "Had y'self a good sleep, eh? Now how 'bout a dipper o' water. . .think you c'n use it?"

Marshall's eyes answered. Luke slid a thick left arm under Marshall's head, raised him gently. . .there was a water bucket within reach, and Luke, twisting, captured the dipper that hung over the lip of the bucket, plunged it into its depths, twisted around again.

"Here y'are," he said.

He held the dipper to Marshall's lips. The latter drank slowly. Presently, when the dipper was drained, Luke slid it back into the bucket.

"Feel 'ny easier now?" he asked.

Jim and Toby had perched themselves on the driver's seat, their booted legs dangling down inside the wagon.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Toby said.

Marshall's eyes ranged upward quickly. He looked at Jim, then at Toby. . .an expression that indicated recognition came into his face. His lips parted in a wan smile.

"Howdy," he said.

Toby, evidently satisfied, grinned. He reached behind him and produced a gun belt and held it aloft. . .the butts of a brace of heavy black Colts jutted out of its holsters.

"That's yourn, ain't it?" he asked. Marshall nodded. "Found it when I was ridin' around."

He slung the belt over a peg that had been driven into a cross-bar in the wagon frame that arched overhead.

"Funny thing, ain't it?" he mused. "A feller c'n get so attached t' one partic'lar thing like a horse or a gun that when you take it away fr'm 'im, doggone if he don't feel lost, a'most naked, y'might say. I once knew a feller up Cheyenne way, Lefty Miller his name was. Wa-al, Lefty. . ."

"Toby," Luke said over his shoulder.

"You say somethin', Luke?"

"S'ppose you go take a walk f'r y'self."

"What for? B'sides, there ain't no place t' go."

Luke looked up at him and frowned. Toby's face reflected his disappointment.

"O-h, awright," he mumbled. "Doggone funny how I allus get in some-b'dy's way."

Jim nudged him.

"Come on," he said.

Toby glared at him, swung his legs over the wide seat, and climbed down. Jim followed him.

"Hate t' allus hafta shut him up," Luke said presently. "But all you hafta do is give Toby some encouragement and he's off. He c'n talk the ear offa a feller without even comin' up f'r air."

Marshall made no comment.

"If there's anythin' on your chest,"

Luke went on, "that you might want t' spill, go right ahead. Helps a feller sometimes."

"I'm obliged t' you f'r takin' care o' me."

Luke grinned.

"You're welcome, on'y that ain't what I was expectin' you t' say. What'd you do t' rile up the Mormons so's they'd give you a whalin' like they done?"

"O-h, nothing much. Helped a girl get away fr'm one o' their convert trains."

"Uh-huh, and then they caught up with you, most likely with the girl, too, eh?"

"They jumped me when I was asleep."

"I see. And what are you plannin' t' do now?"

MARSHALL smiled coldly.

"What d'you think?"

Luke eyed him quietly.

"Pay 'em back," he said shortly. "Other fellers've started off t' do the same thing on'y they didn't get very far. They wound up with mebbe another whippin' or even a bullet in their gizzards and that was that."

"Go on," Marshall said.

"'Course there's more'n one way o' skinnin' a cat. Some fellers rush out, lookin' high and low f'r one, 'till they just about run th'mselves ragged. Others take it easy, just go along, figgerin' one's bound t' come along sooner or later, and sometimes one does."

"How would you go about it?"

"Y'mean about skinnin' a cat or squarin' up with the Mormons?" Luke asked, a twinkle in his eye.

Marshall grinned up at him.

"Oh, either one. You just take your pick."

"Then s'ppose we f'rget about the danged cat. . .I don't like the critters. A Mormon's somethin' else. Now if it was me that got a whippin' like you got, I'd kinda lay low f'r a spell. Then I'd tie up with someb'dy worthwhile, just t' have someb'dy I could trust watchin' things b'hind me. Get the idea?"

"Sure."

"Once I'd made the connection, I'd dig in. I allus like t' have both o' my feet fixed solid b'fore I start 'nything. Then, when I was settled, I'd start doin' things, little ones, y'understand. I'd bite off a little hunk o' somethin' Mormon here, then I'd bite off somethin' somewhere's else. Pretty soon, doggone if I wouldn't have a man sized hunk chawed off."

"Anything else?"

Luke shrugged his shoulder.

"Dunno, 'less you mean c'n I suggest someb'dy worth tyin' up with."

"That'd be a big help."

"Awright," Luke said in his matter-of-fact way of speaking. "There's a feller named Anderson who has a spread some fifty or sixty miles west o' here. I happen t' know that he'd be tickled t' death if someb'dy like you was t' come ridin' up t' him and ask 'im for a job."

"That so?"

"He sure would. 'Course he ain't got the cash t' pay out reg'lar wages, still he's just about the swellest feller t' work for that you'll ever meet up with. He's straight, ain't scared o' anything, man or beast, and anything he tells you is just the gospel truth. What's more, he'll feed you well, and fin'lly, he'll back your play all the way."

"Sounds like he might be just the feller I'm lookin' for."

"Wouldn't be a-tall surprised, Marshall, if he was."

"You goin' Anderson's way?"

"Yep, leastways we oughta come within a couple o' miles o' his place, and you oughta be able t' make it the rest o' the way by yourself. I was plannin' t' stop off at Penfield t' buy some things, but heck, we don't need any o' them so bad that they can't wait 'till we hit some other settlement."

Marshall nodded.

"Meantime, if I was you, I'd just stay put and take it easy. When you get t' feelin' more like y'self, ain't nobody t' stop you fr'm haulin' y'self outta here."

"Thanks. I sure hope I get a chance someday t' pay you back f'r all this."

"Forget it. I ain't doin' 'ny more f'r you than you'd do f'r me," Luke

replied. He hitched up his belt. "Wa-al, I got things t' do and you got rest t' catch up with, so mebbe we'd both better get at them. I'll stop by again later on."

He turned, bumped his head on the cross frame and cursed under his breath. He looked back over his shoulder, caught Marshall's eye and laughed softly.

"Doggoned if I don't bump my head every time I get in or outta these danged wagons," he said sheepishly. "I must be gettin' old. Can't seem t' remember from one time t' the next to keep my head down until I start bumpin' it, then the on'y satisfaction I get outta addin' another lump t' the one I a'ready got is a good cussin'. Be seein' you."

He swung himself over the driver's seat and climbed down.

CHAPTER V

These Guns for Hire

THE early morning air was crisp and invigorating and the big black gloried in it. He swept over the ground at a swift pace, snorting and blowing loudly, a sort of trumpeting that indicated that he was thoroughly enjoying himself. When Marshall halted him he was annoyed. . .he pawed the ground impatiently; Marshall disregarded his outburst, simply jerked the reins a bit more sharply than ordinarily and after his short-lived display of temper, the big horse quieted down.

Marshall twisted around in the saddle and looked back. There was no sign now of the wagon train, not even a swirl of dust in the awakening sky; there was no sign of Luke and Jim and Toby who had ridden a "piece" with him beyond their waiting wagons. After a brief word and a simple "So long," they had wheeled their mounts and galloped away.

Luke had said nothing more about Anderson since their first conversation. Actually he seemed to have avoided Marshall since then. It was only when he had come up to Marshall and nodded that the latter understood that they had reached Anderson's country. Now they were gone and he was alone in that vast stretch of hostile country, an unwelcome stranger with a bruised and lacerated back, a grim-faced man with a cold determination to repay his enemies for their man-handling of him. Fury and burning pain had long since gone. . .time had made him calmer but it had not lessened his determination to exact repayment for the whipping he had received.

He had already noticed a curious difference in himself and it puzzled him. Incidents that had previously made up his life, the people he had known. . .everything and everyone associated with those years, now seemed so completely unimportant, even vague.

It seemed as though nothing had ever happened to him before he came to Penfield. He wondered if the whipping had driven everything connected with his earlier life out of him. Now the thoughts that occupied his mind, that motivated him, bore a Penfield date. . .his earlier years seemed to be separated from his more current activities and misadventures by a curtain. Even his struggles with the unyielding desert had already lost their dramatic intensity. That, too, was now part of his earlier life. . .the almost forgotten and unimportant past.

Now there was but one thought in his mind. All he could think of were Mormons and he surprised himself with the ferocity of his hatred for them. It was a hatred such as he had never known or experienced before. He wondered how long it would be before he came to grips with them again, wondered, too, if he would be able to wait for that moment. His lips thinned into a straight line. . . from every Mormon without exception he would exact repayment.

ONE day he would meet the man with the black, hostile eyes and the thick, black beard. That would be a memorable day for him for then he would vent his pent-up anger upon that man. He would beat him, kick him, lash him, pour out upon him every angry feeling he had ever had.

There were some other Mormons whose faces he would not easily forget and the very thought of them promised them a man-handling the like of which they had never experienced. It made him feel warm all over and he took a fierce delight in thinking about his repayment day.

Then Dora's face appeared in his thoughts and he frowned. He wondered what had happened to her, wondered if the Mormons had whipped her, too. Grimly he told himself that he would look into that matter and when he did, well, whatever vengeance he had already planned would be doubled.

He looked eastward. Somewhere beyond the range of his sight was the saucer-like valley and Penfield. He would go back there some day; his reputation as a Mormon scourge would precede him and he would delight in seeing the Mormons cringe before him. He looked up, suddenly realizing that he was moving again. He hadn't nudged the black but now he made no attempt to halt him. Now, too, he noticed that they were going steadily uphill. The grass seemed to sweep upward like a green carpet spreading away to the very base of a throne. In the distance ahead he could see a short range of foothills.

Suddenly he saw a corral. . .it was unusually small and it was empty. He recalled that Luke had described Anderson's place as a small "spread." On the left was a low, squat, drab building. He glanced at it once and promptly decided it was the bunkhouse. He had seen many of them and they were all more or less alike, the only difference in them being in size. Fifty feet ahead, veering off toward the right, was a sprawling structure. . .that was evidently the ranch-house.

Then his eyes widened. In the thin grass probably a dozen feet in front of the bunkhouse lay the outstretched figure of a man, face downward in dirt and grass, both arms outflung. The black stiffened; Marshall jerked him to a halt. His eyes ranged over the bunkhouse. The door was ajar, the single window was glassless. Jagged glass splinters jutted out of its frame. He looked down at the sprawled figure again. Beneath the man was a brownish rather than red stain of blood. From under his right leg the butt of a Colt protruded.

Marshall nodded understandingly. He had seen such sights before, and now, in his mind, he was already reconstructing the death scene. The man had doubtless been routed out of his bunk. . .clutching his gun he had rushed out only to be shot down in his tracks.

Suddenly and instinctively Marshall was aware of the immediate presence of still another man, and he looked up quickly. A lean man with a bronzed and lined face topped by a shock of uncombed grey hair peered out at him from behind the far side of the bunkhouse. Now the man stepped out. He carried a half-raised rifle in his hands. He halted presently and eyed Marshall hostilely. The rifle came upward a bit.

"Who'n hell are you?" the man demanded.

"I'm lookin' for a feller named Anderson."

The man grunted.

"Awright," he said gruffly. "You've had your look. Now you c'n turn around and get the hell outta here."

Marshall did not move.

"Luke Hanley gave you quite a build-up," he said coldly, equallying the man's tone. "But f'r my money you ain't anything like the feller he d'scribed."

"Who'd you say?"

"Luke Hanley."

"That's who I thought you said." The rifle was lowered. "I'm sorry, Mister. Didn't mean t' rile up so, but I've had one helluva time and I ain't got hold o' myself yet. Climb down."

"Thanks."

MARSHALL dismounted. The man came closer. He glanced at the sprawled figure on the ground and shook his head soberly, then he raised his eyes again to Marshall.

"Looks like things've been goin' on around here," the latter said. "Raiders pay you a surprise visit?"

The man's eyes glinted.

"Mormons," he said grimly.

"Oh!"

Anderson nodded.

"Caught us asleep," he continued. "Jerry come bustin' outta the bunkhouse and run plumb into gunfire. He never even had a chance t' fight back, poor feller."

Marshall nodded understandingly.

"This a private war. . .or c'n anybody take a hand in it?" he asked.

The rancher eyed him sharply.

"Anybody who's in a helluva sweat t' join his ancestors," he replied. "You tired o' livin' already?"

"Not 'specially. But don't you worry none about me. . .I've allus been able t' take care o' myself."

"Feller's gotta be able t' do that in this part o' the country, Mister, if he aims t' make a habit o' livin'."

"That holds good in every part o' the West," Marshall said quietly. "This the way the Mormons treat all ranchers?"

"Dunno much about 'nybody else. All I know is what they're doin' t' me. Y'see, this is Mormon country . . .leastways they act like it was theirs. The fact that I've been here longer'n most o' them have don't make 'ny diff'rence. They've been after me t' quit this place f'r a long time now. . .they've run off my cattle, killed off the few men I've had workin' for me, and. . ."

"And now they figger they've got you where you can't help y'self. That the idea?"

"Just about."

"What d'you aim t' do?"

"Stay put 'till they run me off!"

"Good f'r you! Want 'ny company?"

"Like I said b'fore, Mister. . .joinin' up with me is just invitin' y'self t' your own funeral."

"Like I told you b'fore, Anderson, I'll take that chance."

Anderson's eyes ranged over the tall man before him, lingered for a moment on the brace of guns around his waist.

"Them Colts you're wearin' are mighty influencin'," he said finally.

"Awright. . .you've hired y'self two guns. Forget about me. . .I'm on'y the feller who totes 'em."

"Whatever you say. Oh, yeah. . . how much d'you figger I oughta pay you?"

"Don't expect t' be paid."

"Then you've made yourself a deal, Mister, on'y I'm danged if I c'n savvy why."

"I don't like Mormons."

"Reckon that's just about as good a reason as any I could think of. What'd you say your name is?"

"I didn't say."

"Oh. . ."

"It's Marshall."

"There's just one more thing—I should've mentioned it b'fore. The Mormons'll be back late this afternoon."

"Awright. . .let 'em come."

Anderson stared at him for a moment, then he shook his head and turned away.

"Wanna give me a hand with Jerry?" he asked over his shoulder, halting beside the dead man.

Marshall hitched up his belt and strode forward.

THE day wore away slowly. There was little work to be done around the place, and now, in view of the Mormons' expected return visit, neither man showed any inclination to do anything but wait for that moment. Both were content to idle away the time. They talked for a while, then fell silent, each busy with his own thoughts. Presently they resumed their conversation, but it was confined to brief, unimportant talk that could be terminated at a moment's notice without much loss to either man.

They were sitting on the low step in front of the ranch-house. . .Anderson was talking, recalling an amusing incident of some years before; he halted his tale abruptly, looked up, and listened intently.

"What's the matter?" Marshall asked.

"Thought I heard somethin'."

"Like what?"

"Hoof beats."

Neither man stirred, neither of them spoke for another full minute, then Anderson got to his feet. His face was grim again.

. "It's them awright," he said. "Hear 'em?"

Marshall nodded.

"Come on. We'd better get set t' welcome th'm."

Marshall climbed to his feet. In the distance he could hear a swelling echo of approaching hoof beats. He followed Anderson into the house. The rancher quickly closed the front door, bolted it securely.

"How 'bout th back door?" Marshall asked.

"It's still bolted fr'm yesterday," Anderson replied. He had placed his rifle beside the door earlier in the day. . .he turned, caught it up, gripped it tightly. "Marshall, you take that window. I'll take the door."

THE echo of galloping hoofs, iron-shod hoofs on shale and stone, swelled into a thunderous clatter. Marshall jerked out his guns, crouched down at the open window that Anderson had nodded to. . .it was probably eight feet from the door. Dust from racing hoofs climbed skyward slowly. . .from his place at the window Marshall watched it.

He turned his head fleetingly and glanced at Anderson. . .the rancher stood rigidly stiff, tensed and waiting. A horseman flashed by and Marshall turned quickly. . he saw a man whirl past the house, wheel and come loping back. Another horseman appeared, then half a dozen others. They pulled up directly opposite the house, dismounted, stood for a moment beside their horses. Marshall scanned their faces, his eyes ranging from one to the other until he had looked over all of them. He frowned, disappointment showing on his face . . .he had never seen any of them before.

"Anderson!" a voice cried authoritatively.

The rancher did not answer. He turned his head, looked at Marshall.

"How 'bout me handling this?" the latter asked.

Anderson shook his head.

"Nope," he said doggedly.

Marshall turned away. He watched the band of Mormons opposite, waited for them to make their first move. It came almost immediately. . .a big, bare-headed man with rolled-up shirt sleeves and huge, thick bronzed arms detached himself from his companions and came striding toward the house. He lumbered rather than walked.

"Like a big bear," Marshall muttered. He tightened his grip on his gun butts.

The man looked back over his shoulder. . .now he was at the low step. He mounted it, came up to the door, tried the knob. . .when the door failed to open, he scowled darkly, kicked it viciously.

"Anderson!" he yelled angrily.

Marshall looked up.

"Reckon you'd better answer," he said quietly.

Anderson nodded, squared his shoulders.

"Yeah?" he called aloud.

"Oh. . .still here, eh? Come on, come outta there!"

"I'm stayin' put, Davis. If you want me, you'll hafta come get me!"

"Why, you. . . . . !"

The big man backed away from the door. Marshall could see his every move. Davis' right arm jerked awkwardly. . .a big six-gun flashed into his hand, snapped upward, level with the middle of the floor.

A Colt thundered suddenly with an ear-splitting roar. . .Davis' gun was wrenched from his hand. He cried out and grabbed at his wrist with his left hand. . .he uncovered the "injured" wrist presently, cautiously, and stared hard at it, almost unbelievingly when he found that he had not been hit.

His eyes went down to the gun that had fallen at his feet. . .the barrel was twisted out of shape, as though some giant had seized it and bent it in two. He stopped to snatch it up that he might examine it at closer range when the Colt boomed a second time. The gun spun away crazily. . .it soared over Davis' feet, cleared the low step and fell into the dirt.

Davis wheeled, tripped over his own feet. . .he missed the step, plunged forward and fell heavily to

the ground. For a moment he lay there, stunned and breathless, sprawled out on his stomach, then he stirred, scrambled hastily to his feet and fled.

A Mormon with a half-raised rifle in his hands ran toward the house. His rifel swept upward to his shoulder. . .he fired twice. Leaden slugs splintered the middle panel of the door. The Colts in Marshall's hands flamed a sharp protest and the man dropped his rifle and clutched at his chest with both hands. He staggered and turned slowly, tottered, crumpled suddenly and sagged brokenly to his knees. For a moment he was motionless, then he pitched forward on his face into the dirt.

THE Mormons had had enough. In confusion they vaulted into their saddles, lashed their horses frenziedly and thundered away in head-long flight. The man who lay in the dirt moved slightly. . .but it was only an instant-long twitching of the muscles of his left leg. . .then he was still.

The furious pounding of his companions' horses swelled briefly when they clattered over a stretch of stony ground; in another moment it began to fade out, then suddenly it died away completely. Now a curious silence draped itself over the place. Nothing moved, not even a vagrant leaf that had dropped so limply on the dirt span between the house and the spot where the Mormons had pulled up. A puff of gun smoke climbed lazily upward into the blue, tranquil sky; it billowed luxuriously, gently, then a sudden gust of wind burst upon it and swept it away, dissolving it in flight.

"Reckon that'll be 'bout all fr'm them for now," Marshall said aloud. He climbed stiffly to his feet, holstered his guns, hitched up his belt. "Bet they won't be in such a sweat t' tackle us again, eh, Anderson?"

There was no reply. Marshall turned and looked toward the door. Anderson, his rifle still clutched tightly in his hands, was on his knees, his face pressed against the lower panel of the door. He slid sideways as Marshall stared at him. . .then he toppled over to the floor. Marshall bounded to his side, bent over him. Slowly he straightened up. Anderson had defended his home to the last.

CHAPTER VI

Andersonville

THE three days following Anderson's untimely death were long, dreary days, filled with indecision. Marshall found it difficult to decide upon the best course to follow. . .to stay on at the ranch by himself and attempt to run it single-handedly would impose a handicap upon him for certainly the Mormons would return, and when they did it would be in far greater force than before. He could fight them off for a time, but in the end they would press home their numerical advantage and he would be overpowered. To abandon the ranch would mean a betrayal. . .Anderson had taken him in and he had seen the man die in the defense of his place.

Certainly Anderson would have wanted the fight against the Mormons carried on; despite the man's blunt warnings to him to move on rather than ally himself with what appeared to be a hopeless cause, Marshall was confident that had the rancher retained consciousness long enough after their attackers had been driven off, his last words would have been a plea to Marshall to hold fast.

Now, for the first time, despite the fact that he knew the Mormons might return at any moment, he ventured away from the house. The black was restless, impatient, and Marshall saddled him, vaulted up, and rode slowly past the drab, bullet-marked bunkhouse, then past the empty corral. Marshall looked up quickly when he heard a distant rumbling of wagon wheels. He stiffened tensely when he heard the louder thunder of crashing rifles and the sharp metallic echoing clatter of horses' hoofs. He spurred the black and sent him racing up a grassy in-

cline, halted him when they mounted the crest of the hill and looked down.

Whirling uphill at a reckless pace were two huge prairie wagons. They rocked from side to side as they came on. Two horsemen, flanking the rear wagon, were firing at a dust-hidden foe which suddenly became a party of ten or more pursuing horsemen. Flashes from the pursuers' ranks indicated that they, too, were firing. The butt of Anderson's rifle, encased in the leather sheath beneath Marshall's right leg, seemed to ease itself forward. Marshall jerked it out of the sheath, swung himself out of the saddle. The black, a battle-seasoned veteran, wheeled without a word or a sign from Marshall, jogged down the incline; when he reached the foot of the hill, he halted, wheeled and waited. He spied a patch of fresh young grass at a short distance off, trotted over to it and began to nibble at it.

The wagons were now a couple of hundred feet away. Marshall tore off his hat, waved it frantically, beckoning them on. He saw a man on the driver's seat in the first wagon ply a whip, heard it crack with a pistol-shot report as it curled over the heads of his plunging horses.

On they came, with the cumbersome wagons careening wildly as their huge wheels rolled over hidden or unseen rocks. Then they were directly below him. The cracking whips drove the horses upward, steadily uphill until they came struggling over the very top of the hill, heaving and panting to a momentary stop. Beside the driver in the lead wagon were two bonneted, white-faced women. They looked at Marshall questioningly, appealingly.

"Straight down the hill," he commanded, pointing. "Head f'r the house. Get the wagon 'round the back. Go 'head!"

The driver nodded, pulled the brake halfway back to guard against a too hasty descent, then the wagon rolled away. The second wagon came along almost immediately, its horses straining to the very utmost, followed the lead wagon down the incline. Now, too, their outriders. . . the two flanking horsemen. . .came whirling up the hill. They halted, looked at Marshall.

"You fellers better get down," he said quickly. "We oughta be able t' stop them hellions fr'm here without 'ny trouble."

THE two men dismounted without delay or question. They appeared completely willing to do as Marshall directed.

"Run your horses down that side o' the hill," he instructed, indicating the direction. "They'll be outta the way down there."

One of the men reached for his horse's bridle. . .the animal shied away. Marshall frowned, pushed past the man, whacked the horse lustily across the rump with his open hand and the animal promptly skittered away. His mate dashed after him. Both started down the incline at a pace that foretold disaster. . .both promptly collided, lost their footing on the grassy slope and went sliding to the very bottom to a jolting and doubtless painful stop. Their riders followed Marshall's lead; they sprawled out on their stomachs with their rifles ready.

"Hold your fire," Marshall instructed. "Give th'm a chance to come halfways up the hill, then pour it into 'em."

He peered over the edge of the hill, watched the pursuing horsemen approach. They came thundering up to the foot of the hill, spurred their mounts and sent them pounding upward. They were probably thirty feet from the top, roughly halfway up, when Marshall's rifle snapped to his shoulder.

"Awright!" he cried. "Give it to 'em!"

Three rifles crashed together, Marshall cursed, tossed his aside, and yanked out his Colts. He emptied them into the advancing mass of men and horses.

There were screams from wounded, pain-maddened horses, cries from wounded men who found themselves hurled to the ground when their mounts fell before the defenders' withering fire; some of the men were

trampled by their own horses who whirled this way and that in their panicky, frantic efforts to break out of the death trap. Marshall holstered his emptied guns, caught up the rifle he had discarded but a minute before, and blazed away with it, adding its thunder to the mounting din. For one brief, frenzied minute the fury of the battle soared to its highest possible pitch. . .then it was over.

"Hold it!" Marshall yelled.

The men beside him ceased firing. They peered through the pall of gun smoke that hung over the hill. . .it lifted presently, gently, like a filmy veil being withdrawn. On the side of the hill men and horses lay motionless, some outstretched, others in curious limp heaps. Racing away from the scene, and already quite a distance from the hill, were three horsemen who lashed and spurred their worn mounts in a desperate effort to put distance between the defenders' rifles and themselves. The three men looked on quietly, mutely.

MARSHALL grunted, climbed to his feet. The two riflemen followed. . .Marshall trudged down the incline and his death-dealing companions, clinging to his heels, brought up the rear.

The black, a bit apart from the other two horses, came forward at once, whinnying softly, and rubbed his nose against Marshall's chest. Marshall patted the black's sleek neck, sheathed his rifle, vaulted into the saddle and wheeled the black, then, when the others had mounted, too, led them at a loping gait toward the ranch. They cantered past the empty corral and the deserted bunkhouse with its door still ajar and its single window still paneless. . .out of the corner of his eye, Marshall saw the two men exchange glances. Later on, he decided, he would tell them about Anderson, then they would understand the things they were wondering about.

They clattered up to the ranchhouse; a man, the wagon driver whom Marshall had directed to the ranch, came out to meet them. There was an eager, anxious question in his eyes.

"Awright?" he asked.

Marshall nodded.

"They've gone," he answered. "The ones that were left o' th'm."

The man breathed easier.

"I'm sure glad t' hear that," he said and grinned. Then his face grew serious again. "I want t' thank you f'r helpin' us like you done, Mister. That was mighty decent of you."

"Anybody else'd have done the same," Marshall replied.

"Mebbe. Anyway, now I'm afraid you're gonna hafta do even more."

"Awright," Marshall said with a grin. "Just what'd you have in mind?"

"Wa-al, I've gotta ask you t' put us up f'r a spell. My wife ain't able t' go on. . .chances are she won't be f'r mebbe four or five days yet. Y'see, Mister, she's just had a baby. . .right smack in your parlor, too!"

* * *

With supper out of the way—a meal that was made up of Anderson's dwindling supply of foodstuffs together with a larger portion taken from the wagons' cupboards—the dishes washed and put away, Ed Stoner joined his wife and their new baby in what had once been Anderson's own room. Tom Judd, the driver of the second wagon, and his wife, the latter exhausted by the day's excitement, followed the Stoners to bed . . .Marshall had insisted that they take the second of the three bedrooms. Now it was evening, with the lengthening shadows of night reaching out covetously. Jerry Lake and Pete Lester, the two outriders, joined Marshall on the top rail of the corral.

"Heard about that Anderson feller b'fore we started into the desert," Lake said presently. He shifted himself a bit, made himself more comfortable, hooked his boot toes in the lower rail. "Kinda kept him in mind all the way out. Then, when them Mormons jumped us, I told Stoner t' head straight f'r here."

"Danged good thing Marshall was

there t' tell us which way t' go," Lester added. "Chances are that while we were flounderin' around lookin' f'r the place, the Mormons would've caught up with us and blasted us t' hell an' gone."

Lake was frowning now.

"Y'know, Pete," he said. "I've been wonderin' about that wagon train that followed us. I kinda lost track o' them after a while."

"Y'mean you wonder if the Mormons got th'm?" Lester asked.

"Uh-huh."

"What started the Mormons waylayin' the wagon trains?" Marshall asked.

"Heard their missionaries were bein' hung or shot down right an' left in Ohio and Arkansas," Lake answered. "Mebbe they d'cided t' get square with whoever come along."

"I see," Marshall said. He lowered himself to the ground. "Gettin' dark. We'd better get closer to the house. No tellin' when the Mormons might d'cide to pay us another call. Come on."

IT was midnight when Marshall, occupying the third bedroom in the house. . .Lake and Lester had bedded themselves down in the bunkhouse for the night. . .awoke with a start. He sat up in bed and listened for a moment. . .in the distance he could hear muffled gun-fire. He had kicked off his boots before climbing into bed. . .now he slipped his feet into them again, caught up his gun belt and buckled it on. Noiselessly he made his way out of the house. He emerged into the moonlight to find Jerry Lake striding toward the house; Marshall went forward to meet him.

"Hear that rifle blastin'?" Lake asked.

"Woke me up. What d' you make of it?"

"Dunno. Pete says he's got 'n idea it's that wagon train we were talkin' about. . .the one that kinda dropped outta sight on the desert."

"Might be."

"What d'you think we oughta do, Marshall?"

"Saddle up and be ready t' ride. Might be a good idea t' wake Judd and Stoner, then if we d'cide t' go lookin', they c'n stand guard."

"That's 'n idea, awright. Tell you what, Marshall. . .you go wake them fellers. Me and Pete'll saddle up and wait f'r you at the corral."

"Better not try t' do 'nything with the black. He's liable t' act up and kick your heads off. I'll saddle 'im myself."

"Right," Lake said quickly. "We'll just lay out your gear so's t' save you time. You c'n finish the job y'self."

Pete Lester, rifle in hand, came out of the bunkhouse Jerry wheeled and ran to meet him. Marshall turned, retraced his steps, tiptoed into the house. . .minutes later the front door opened, and he reappeared, followed by Stoner and Judd. They held a brief, whispered conversation, then Marshall trudged away to the corral. He found Lake and Lester awaiting him, their horses fully saddled.

"They're still blastin' away," Lake said.

"Yeah, they're still at it," Lester added.

"Do we ride?" the former asked.

"Might be a good idea f'r us to ride up to the top o' that hill," Marshall replied. "Mebbe we c'n see somethin' fr'm there."

Lake nodded in agreement.

"There's your stuff, Marshall," he said, pointing to a saddle, blanket and bridle that had been heaped against the corral bars. "Want 'ny help?"

"Nope."

The black came troting forward in response to Marshall's low-pitched whistle. It was a minute's work to saddle him, then the three men mounted their horses, wheeled and clattered away. Marshall swung into the lead. . .Lake rode beside him while Pete Lester, spurring his horse, overtook Lake and ranged his mount alongside. It was slower going on the hill itself for the grass was damp and slippery. Finally, they reached the top and reined in. They probed the night light with eager eyes.

"Look over there!" Marshall said. "To the left! See those gun flashes?"

Lake, inching his horse closer to the black, followed Marshall's pointing finger.

"Oh, yeah. . .I see 'em!"

"Pretty far away," Lester said. "Ain't they?"

"Couple o' miles," Lake said in reply. "Mebbe three or four at the most."

Marshall tightened his grip on the reins. Lake, watching him, looked up at him questioningly.

"What are you figgerin' on?" he asked.

"We could come up behind the Mormons and throw a good scare into 'em," Marshall answered. "In the darkness they wouldn't have any idea how many there are of us, and figgerin' they were caught in a trap, the chances are they'd hightail it away. What d'you fellers think?"

"Sounds awright t' me," Lake said quickly.

"T' me too," Lester said.

"Let's go then," Marshall said.

AGAIN he took the lead. . .slowly they started down the opposite side of the hill.

"Watch y'selves," Marshall called over his shoulder. "Looks like we all kinda f'rgot there were Mormons and horses layin' all over the place!"

Motionless and grotesquely sprawled bodies of men and horses loomed up in the black's path and he jerked to an abrupt halt.

"Go on!" Marshall commanded.

The black whinnied softly but Marshall was unyielding. . .the big horse's whinny grew shrill; Marshall nudged him with his knees and the black finally went on again, reluctantly of course. He veered away sharply, made his way down the hillside gingerly. Presently, with Lake and Lester close behind, they reached the bottom of the hill. Marshall wheeled the black. . .his companions edged their horses closer to him.

"We'll take it easy f'r a while," he explained. "Then, when we begin t' get close, we'll step on it. . .savvy? When I holler, start blastin' away f'r all you're worth. We want the Mormons t' think we're 'n army. Awright? Let's go!"

He whirled the black round. . .the big horse fairly leaped away only to have Marshall jerk him back sharply. Lake came pounding up to take up his position on Marshall's left, and the angry black bounded away again. He swept over the ground at a furious pace. . .when Marshall sought to slow him down, the big horse fought doggedly for his head. There was a spirited tussle for a moment but in the end the black subsided and permitted both Lake and Lester to pull up alongside.

Now it was shoulder to shoulder and flank to flank with the big black setting the pace and infecting the other horses with his tremendous strength and energy. Distance fell away behind them. The crashing of rifles grew in volume, far louder than before, proof that they were getting closer to the actual battle ground. Flame from thundering rifles leaped like so many bursts of yellowish light. To the right, huge, indistinguishable hulks loomed up. . .the prairie schooners. Now two black forms and figures suddenly appeared ahead of them. Marshall had led them directly into the Mormons.

"Left!" he yelled. "Pour it into 'em!"

Their guns thundered in unison with the authoritative voices of his twin Colts speaking just a bit louder than the others. Their massed fire swept everything away. . .what had been indistinguishable but a moment before now became panic-stricken horses and stumbling, dazed men. The belching guns of the three men wafted them backwards, ground them into the earth. Guns were turned upon them but the powerful black veering sharply to the left, shouldering Lester's mount out of the way, led them out of range before the surprised Mormons could sense what was going on.

There was confusion in their ranks and now men and horses, some of them screaming as leaden slugs tore into their bodies, collided with one another, trampled others, strove frantically to get out of the way. The

swelling turmoil reached a deafening pitch. . .it was over within a span of brief minutes.

THE routed Mormons fled away into the night. Gunfire ceased almost at once, however the throbbing, reverberating echo of thundering rifles hung for a moment more in the tensed air. Then it too vanished and an eased silence deepened over the range. Suddenly, great camp-fires burst into being, lighting up the range. In the shadowy darkness behind them, towering high into the black night light, were the wagons. Men with rifles in their hands emerged from the darkness, halted on the fringe of their encampment. Marshall and his two companions came riding up.

"Howdy!" a cheery voice called.

Marshall pulled up, swung out of the saddle. Lake and Lester, following at the black's snapping heels, pulled up too, eased themselves in their saddles. A tall man with a rifle cradled in his arms came forward now.

"Glad t' see you, Mister," he said by way of greeting. "Much obliged f'r your help."

Marshall halted, shifted his twin holsters.

"That's awright," he replied. "Gave us a chance t' do some squarin' up with the Mormons."

"What d'you figger we oughta do now?" the tall man asked. "Push on?"

"No need f'r that," Marshall answered. "The Mormons won't bother you 'ny more t'night. They've had enough for one spell. I'd keep 'n eye open, though, and get goin' again at dawn."

"Uh-huh. . .and which way d'we go fr'm here. . .due West?"

"Wa-al, no, not exactly. Mebbe I'd better leave a man here t' guide you. You'll hafta pass my place, so it won't be puttin' him out any."

"Thanks again, Mister."

Marshall turned his head and the black came up to him.

"Anything else b'fore I go?"

The man grinned sheepishly.

"You're leadin' with your chin, Mister, when you ask a question like that."

"Mebbe, but fire away. It don't cost much t' listen."

The man lowered his rifle.

"How you fixed f'r extra room up t' your place?"

"Not too good. Why?"

"Couple o' the women are expectin' babies."

"Oh, yeah? How many o' th'm?"

"Four."

"Four, eh?" Marshall repeated and whistled softly. "That'd make five, countin' the one we got bedded down at the house right now. 'Course it's a little diff'rent with her, bein' that she's a'ready had her baby."

The man waited.

"Oh, I s'ppose we c'n take care o' them," Marshall said shortly. "Leastways we c'n put 'em up f'r a spell if that'll help 'em any."

The man nodded and the grin on his face deepened.

"I got somethin' else t' ask," he said.

"More women with babies?"

"Yes an' no. Y'see, Mister, there are two other women that could stand just a mite o' restin' up."

"What's the matter with 'em?"

"Same's the one you got at your place a'ready. They had their babies right in the middle o' all the fightin'. They didn't have no easy time o' things and now they're not doin' too good. Y'know, a wagon floor's awright ord'narily, but when you ain't feelin' too chipper, it's a'most like ridin' on the back of a bronc."

Marshal nodded understandingly. The black nudged him and Marshall turned, gripped the reins and swung himself up into the saddle.

"Bring 'em along," he said. "Don't promise 'em too much 'cause we ain't fixed t' handle too many. But you can tell 'em that we'll do all we c'n t' make 'em comf'table."

He wheeled the black.

"Lester," he called. Pete walked his horse forward. "Pete, d'you mind stayin' here f'r t'night?"

"Anything you say, Marshall."

"They've got some sick women along and if we leave 'em t' make

their own way, they're liable t' wind up back in Penfield. They'll be movin' on at dawn and you c'n show 'em the way up t' the ranch. Awright?"

"Sure."

Lester dismounted, led his horse past a brightly burning camp-fire.

"So long," Marshall called over his shoulder.

The black loped away into the night. Jerry Lake whirled his horse around, spurred him and sent him dashing after the black.

CHAPTER VII

Andersonville

THE DAWN sky was drab and gray, the limitless horizon westward an indefinite and colorless void. A brisk wind swept down from the foothills and beyond, swerved, raced over the ranch in an easterly direction. Dust from the corral and vagrant, sun-browned leaves were caught up and spun away in the twisting, droning surge of the wind.

The door of the empty bunkhouse groaned and squeaked and finally slammed against its frame with a sleep-disturbing crash. The two occupants of the corral, Lake's horse and the black, squatting awkwardly, awoke. They stirred, got to their feet. . .the black wheeled away, shook himself with an accompanying loud snorting, and loped aimlessly around the enclosure. His companion turned and followed him with his eyes, however he made no attempt to join the black.

Marshall, perched on the top rail of the corral, twisted around.

Lake, a motionless, blanket-wrapped figure asleep on a patch of thin grass a dozen feet beyond where Marshall sat, stirred and rolled over. He looked up, caught Marshall's eye and grinned. He picked up his hat, eyed it critically and reshaped it with his hands and clapped it on his head. He caught up the blanket, rolled it up and slung it over his shoulder, and came trudging over to Marshall.

"Ain't you slept a-tall?" he asked.

Marshall shook his head.

"Wasn't any sleep in me," he replied. "It was a swell night, awright, blue sky, silvery moon and all. Feller couldn't ask f'r anything nicer."

"D'pends on the feller," Lake said with a grin.

"Y'mean it ain't natural f'r a man t' even notice there's a moon out 'less there's a girl around to share it it with him?"

"'Course! What's a moon without a girl, huh?"

"Just a moon, I suppose."

"Right. Now take me f'r instance. It's a good thing I ain't the kind that likes t' brag. . ."

"Uh-huh. I kinda figgered you were the shy kind."

Lake grinned again.

"No kiddin' now, Marshall," he continued. "'Course you won't b'lieve this t' look at me now. . .not that I'm so danged old now, y'understand. . . but when I was younger and chipper'n all get-out, I did awright f'r myself under the moon."

"I'm willing t' take your word for it, Jerry. So you were quite a man with the ladies, eh?"

"And how!"

"Ever been married?"

"Heck, yes. . .three times!"

"What were you tryin' t' prove?"

Lake laughed loudly.

"Danged if I know even now! Reckon I was just the marryin' kind, that's all."

"Three times! What happened t' the first two?"

Lake shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing much. Y'might say they just didn't take."

"And the third time?"

Jerry threw up his hands.

"Now that was somethin'! She was a widow, nice-lookin' and all, on'y she didn't think it necessary t' tell me b'fore we got hitched that she had five kids. Heck, the hull bunch o' us lived in a two-room shack and it was plain murder. D'you know, Marshall, that woman had a tongue that was a heap sharper'n a whip. And could she holler!"

"Are you tellin' me or askin'?"

"I'm tellin' you! Marshall, that woman could out-holler 'n Apache!"

"So that marriage didn't take either, eh?"

"Nope. It got so, I'd go out on the range just t' get me some peace an' quiet. Then, after a while, I just couldn't make it t' go back home. I couldn't stand all that squallin' and hollerin'. I got me a job and I keep driftin' further an' further away all the time. Now you couldn't get me t' go back t' that woman and her squallin' kids with a team o' horses."

"When'd you see th'm last?"

Lake rubbed his bristly chin thoughtfully.

"O-h, must be nigh unto 'leven years," he replied.

"Then the squallin' kids oughta be pretty well grown up by now," Marshall said. "Y'know, Jerry, one o' these days they're gonna catch up with you and when they do they'll probably take the hide offa you."

"Oh, yeah? Lemme tell you somethin', Marshall. All I gotta do is smell 'em comin' and I'm gonna light outta wherever I'm at so fast, nob'dy'll be able t' see me f'r dust."

They heard the rumble of heavy wagon wheels. and both looked up. Now they could hear the sharper, metallic echo of horses' hoofs. Lake nodded.

"Reckon that's them," he said. He shifted the rolled-up blanket on his shoulder. "I'd better go stow this stuff o' mine away b'fore comp'ny gets here."

He turned on his heel and trudged away toward the bunkhouse. Marshall looked after him and grinned. He heard a hail from the top of the incline beyond the corral, twisted around and looked up. Pete Lester waved his hat and Marshall acknowledged it. Pete turned in his saddle.

"Come on!" he yelled.

A TEAM of straining horses mounted the crest of the hill. Pete backed his horse out of their way. Now a huge wagon came lurching drunkenly over the summit. It swayed this way, then that, almost toppled over, then miraculously righted itself. There were two women on the wide seat, one on each side of the driver. Beneath their tightly drawn bonnets their faces were white and tensed. The tousled head of a boy appeared behind one of the women. . .now his face was visible for a moment over her hunched shoulder.

"Awright now!" Marshall heard Pete cry. "Use your brake!"

The wagon rumbled past Pete, its brakes squealing as the driver drew it back; he released it part way, then inched it backward again, slowly, as the wagon started down the grassy incline. A second wagon came rolling over the crest, halted at Pete's upraised hand . . . when the first wagon reached level ground, Pete motioned the second one on. A third wagon, a fourth, a fifth braked down the hillside. Jerry Lake had reappeared, and now he jogged alongside the lead wagon, guiding it to a point beyond the ranch-house. It halted presently and the wagons following it pulled up in a single line, one directly behind the other.

Jerry stepped out of the line, ranged his eye over the train. . . there were eleven wagons in line. He turned and looked toward the corral; three more wagons, the last of the train, were rumbling past it.

Two horsemen. . .Pete Lester and the tall man with whom Marshall had talked at the wagon encampment. . . came slowly down the incline. Marshall strode forward to meet them. They met midway between the hill and the corral. Pete grinned down at Marshall and clattered away toward the corral. . .the train leader halted his mount.

"Mornin'," he said.

"Mornin'," Marshall answered. "Everything under c'ntrol?"

"So far."

"Good," Marshall said. "Got things ready f'r them women o' yourn. Couple o' them'll hafta double up, but even so it oughta be a heap more comf'table than in a wagon. You c'n go ahead and get 'em into the house. Oh, yeah. . .got 'ny kids in your party?"

"On'y a few."

"That all? Wa-al, then you c'n keep them up at the house, too. The men folks'll hafta bed down in the wagons. We got 'n extra bunk down

at the bunkhouse. . .you're welcome t' use it."

"Thanks, but I'll stay with the wagons. I've come this far with 'em, reckon I'd better stay put 'til the end."

"Whatever you say. Go 'head. . . I'll be along directly. If you need 'nything b'fore I get there, just holler."

The man nodded, nudged his horse with his knees and cantered away. He rode along the line of wagons until he reached the first one, pulled up beside it and dismounted. Pete came sauntering out of the corral. He stopped briefly to shift his holster, trudged up to Marshall.

"See 'nything o' the Mormons after we left you last night?" Marshall asked.

Pete shook his head.

"Nope," he answered. He pushed his hat back from his eyes, glanced at the long line of halted wagons. "Bet that Anderson feller never had s'many folks on his place in all the years he was here."

"Reckon not."

They turned as Jerry Lake trudged up to them.

"Hi, partner," Pete said with a grin. "How's tricks?"

Lake shook his head.

"What's the matter?" Pete asked quickly.

"It's them women," Jerry said and shook his head again.

Lester grinned broadly.

"First time I ever heard you c'mplain about women," he said, caught Marshall's eye and winked. "Don't tell me some o' them are widows and that they've been eyein' you up a'ready?"

"Don't be so danged smart," Jerry mumbled.

"See any o' your wives among 'em?" Pete asked.

Jerry gave him a baleful glare and Pete turned his head quickly and looked skyward.

"Y'know," Lake said, addressing himself to Marshall. "Every time I looked up, that there feller. . ."

"His name's McLean," Pete said.

Jerry's lip curled.

"Awright, McLean," he snapped. "Who'n hel's tellin' this, huh. . .you or me?"

"You," Pete said and grinned again.

"What about McLean?" Marshall asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Wa-al, sir, every time I looked up, he was helpin' another woman into the house. Pretty soon I thought I was seein' double, so I hightailed it away fr'm there."

"That McLean feller," Pete said. "Understand he comes fr'm Ohio."

"So what?" Jerry demanded.

"Nuthin'," Pete answered. "Don't suppose there's anything outta th' ordinary about a feller just b'cause he comes fr'm Ohio. Lots o' other folks've come fr'm there, too. What I was gonna say was that one o' his drivers told me that McLean's wife run off with a Mormon."

LAKE'S eyes widened with interest.

"On the level?"

Lester nodded gravely.

"Understand that McLean went after 'em and caught 'em. He killed the Mormon."

"What about 'is wife?" Jerry asked.

"Dunno what b'came o' her."

Lake's lip curled scornfully again.

"That's you, awright!" he said angrily. "Never knowed a feller t' come away half cocked th' way you do! Can't you ever get a hull story 'stead o' on'y half of it?"

"I allus get the hull story when it c'ncerns someb'dy I know," Pete retorted. "When it's about someb'dy I don't know, th' hell with it!"

Jerry scowled. . .suddenly the expression on his face changed.

"S-ay," he said excitedly. "Wouldn't it be somethin' if he come out here hopin' t' find 'er. . .and did?"

"If she's out here, I'll find 'er awright," a voice said behind them. They turned quickly. It was McLean, his right thumb hooked in his gun belt. Jerry flushed and averted his eyes.

"Get your women folks settled down?" Marshall asked.

McLean nodded.

"Yep," he answered. "And we're sure grateful for what you've done f'r us. We won't f'rget it in a hurry."

"That's awright," Marshall said. "Glad we were able t' take 'em in."

McLean's hand fell away from his gun belt. He moved a bit closer to them.

"Got somethin' I'd like t' talk t' you about," he began again.

"Go ahead."

"Wa-al, comin' around the back o' the house I got t' thinkin' about something and the more I thought about it, the better I liked th' idea. Now I'd like t' know what you think of it."

"Awright," Marshall said with an encouraging grin. "Tell us about it."

"LESTER, there," McLean continued, nodding toward Pete. "He told me 'bout that Anderson feller who owned this place, and how you come t' get it. Now what about the land north and west o' here? Anybody got title to it?"

"Accordin' to what Anderson told me," Marshall replied, "this is open range and open t' anybody who c'n hold it. 'Course you prob'bly know the Mormons say it b'longs to them, but they don't own it 'nymore than anybody else does. That answer your question?"

"Wa-al, it tells me somethin'," McLean said. He turned and looked northward toward the foothills beyond the ranch. "There's a heap o' fine-lookin' land b'tween here and them foothills."

"I rode through there a couple o' days ago," Marshall said. "It's rich and fertile, and even better'n it looks fr'm here."

McLean, turning to him again, nodded slowly.

"What've you got in mind?" Marshall asked.

"I've been wonderin' if that land couldn't be turned into farm land and made t' pay?"

"Don't know why it couldn't."

"Yeah," Lake said. "But what about the Mormons? The minute they get the wind o' what's goin' on up here they'll bust in on you an' then what?"

"That's right," Lester added. "Like Marshall said, th' Mormons claim this range b'longs t' them. They'll fight like hell t' keep everybody else outta here."

McLean looked at them for a moment.

"Mebbe," he said finally, his face grim. "But they won't find us a push-over. They'll find we c'n fight, too. Fr'm what I've seen o' th'm, they don't fight like they were willin' t' die f'r what they claim is theirs."

"Yeah," Lake persisted. "But there's a hundred o' them t' every one of us out here. Them odds are somethin' to think about."

"Wait a minute," Marshall said. "Give McLean a chance t' finish. I think there's more to it than he's told us so far."

"Y'mean he's got another idea?" Pete asked with a grin.

"You might call it that," McLean said. "I'm gonna build a town here."

Lake and Lester stared hard at him.

"You kiddin'?" the former asked.

"Nope," McLean answered calmly. "My folks are farmers, every last one o' them, and this is farm land, just what we've been huntin' for. We'll settle here an' build."

Jerry and Pete nodded. . .they offered no comment now.

"I think you've got somethin' there," Marshall said.

"Yeah, sure," Jerry said quickly. "On'y I hope they c'n stand off the Mormons. If I know th' critters a-tall, they'll make life hell f'r all o' yuh."

McLean smiled grimly.

"We'll guar'ntee t' give 'em as good as they give us," he said quietly. "And mebbe we'll give 'em better'n we get. They'll find they'll have one helluva time wipin' Andersonville off th' map once we put it there, b'lieve me!"

CHAPTER VIII

An Eye for an Eye

YELLOW lamplight illuminated the room, however the circle of light ended abruptly directly behind the backs of the five men who sat around the huge old table that stood so solidly in the very middle of the room. Weird, fantastic figures, grotesquely formed and shaped, danced over the ceiling and walls. . .shadowy darkness that began at the very outer rim of light spread away to the four walls, deepening into mysterious black at the corners.

Characteristic of all Mormon homes the air was heavy with the smell of strong, home-made soap. . . there was a curious breath of dampness in the air, too; continual and overly conscientious scourings and scrubbings, plus the fact that their houses were shuttered from sun-up to sun-up seemed not only to have prevented the sun from entering and employing its natural drying and warming powers, but it appeared too that the water used so liberally in housecleaning had managed to seep into the flooring and into the very framework of their houses.

Silence, self-imposed, hung heavily within the confines of the room. . . the usual silence that follows a fiery outburst by a strong-willed man to an audience that fears to contradict or oppose him. The five men who sat around the table did not move; four of them, occupying half of the table, sat close together, their elbows touching, their eyes averted. The fifth man, facing them, sat rigidly erect, his arms folded over his chest, his black, piercing eyes framed in a thin, black bearded face, seemed to bore into the others as though daring them to face him unfalteringly.

"Well?" he demanded finally, impatiently.

Four pairs of eyes came up slowly to meet his.

"Fisher?"

A grey-haired man with a weather lined face moistened his lips with a quick-darting tongue. He opened his mouth to speak, swallowed. . .his eyes faltered beneath the taunting gaze of the bearded man; he simply shook his head and closed his mouth. The bearded man smiled.

"Jessup?"

There was no answer, no acknowledgment, nothing but an almost unnoticeable nervous twitching on the part of the man who sat on Fisher's left. Fisher coughed softly behind his hand.

"Harper?"

The third man shifted himself awkwardly and lowered his eyes.

"Wells?"

The man raised his eyes in answer and shook his head. The bearded man laughed coldly, scornfully.

"You cowards!" he said bitingly. "Not one of you has the courage to fight for what you hold dearest. Very well, the responsibility will be mine for I will fight."

He got to his feet, pushed his chair back from the table.

"As for you four. . .I warn you to be careful of your every word, your every act. If you attempt to interfere with me in any way, I shall treat you as ruthlessly as I would an enemy. Now get out!"

The four men climbed to their feet. They moved away from the table, picked up their hats in turn from atop a sturdy chest that stood against the wall, trudged heavily to the door and went out. The door closed softly behind the last man. The bearded man was motionless for a moment, then he strode swiftly to the door and flung it open.

"Boyle!" he called.

There was a quick step outside. The bearded man turned and strolled back to the table, turned again and waited. Presently a burly man with a rifle clutched in his big hands appeared in the doorway.

"Want me, Bishop?" he asked.

"Yes."

Boyle closed the door, leaned back against it.

"The Elders are not to leave town under any circumstances. Is that clear?"

The burly man nodded.

"They are not to be permitted to

exchange messages with each other nor with anyone else."

"'Fraid they might try t' send word t' Salt Lake 'bout what you're plannin' to do?"

"Exactly."

Boyle shook his head in wonderment.

"Y'mean they turned you down cold. . .even Jessup whose brother was hanged down in Texas?" he asked.

"Elder Jessup is just as craven as the others."

"And I allus figgered him t' be tough and hard. Looks like I had him pegged all wrong. Wa-al, what d'we do first?"

"Take steps to prevent the entrance into Utah of wagon trains."

"Good enough. What comes after that?"

Bishop Gould smiled.

"Wipe out all Gentiles who have obtained a foothold on Mormon soil."

"Uh-huh, on'y. . ."

"Only what? If you're thinking about Harper and his militia, rest assured they won't interfere with us. I shall disband the militia at once. You in turn will recruit a new militia."

"I get it, Bishop. Awright, just say the word and my bunch'll be in the saddle ready t' go. Oh, yeah. . . one more thing."

"Yes?"

"What happens to us if Salt Lake gets wind o' what we're doin'?"

The Bishop smiled.

"With your militia behind me, what can Salt Lake do about it?"

A TRAIN of seven wagons halted for the night within a mile of the edge of the desert. Wearied horses and mules were unhitched and left untied within the small circle of drawn-up wagons. Equally tired men and women relaxed their usual vigilance and climbed into their wagons and went to sleep. In the morning, at dawn, they would be on their way again, and with the desert behind them and the fact that they had emerged from its vise unscathed to give them renewed courage and confidence, they felt secure concerning the future.

To some of them their journey was a pilgrimage and somehow they felt that no harm would come to them; others in the party merely smiled inwardly and made certain that their rifles were fully loaded and close at hand. But all of them, even those who were usually the most vigilant, seemed lulled into a false feeling of security; no guards were posted, no precautions taken in case of a sudden attack. Presently, the entire encampment was sound asleep.

A single camp-fire burned brightly within the circle. Its flames crackled and hissed while shadowy figures crept over the desert wastes and made their way unnoticed toward the train. Lithe figures slipped into the encampment. Some made their way toward the huddled group of horses and mules to quiet them should they become frightened at the expected and planned outburst of gunfire; others carrying fire brands in their hands went directly to the camp-fire, plunged them into the flame, withdrew them when they were ablaze, wheeled and hurled them at the wagons.

In a bare minute every wagon in the train was a flaming trap for its sleeping occupants. In still another minute there were sudden screams and shouts from within them, cries of terror and pain, too. . .men, women and children, so suddenly awakened from their sleep, whipped aside the canvas "drops" that served as curtains, straddled the drivers' seats and leaped to the ground.

The raiders, their guns bared and readied, surrounded the wagons. As their victims jumped, a thunderous roar of gunfire was poured into them. Those who were fortunate enough to escape the flames were blasted to death, riddled before they could scramble to their feet; those who managed finally to throw off the burning canvas and managed, too, to reach the drivers' seats were swept backward by the curtain of gunfire and toppled back into the wagons to be consumed by the roaring flames.

A handful of raiders looped ropes over the milling horses and mules, and led them out of the flaming en-

campment. Their companions, their smoking guns still leveled, walked among their huddled victims; when a limp figure moved or stirred, a gun flamed and movement ceased forever. But in another minute or two gunfire ceased completely. The travelers had been wiped out, men, women and children alike.

The raiders disappeared into the waning night while the crackling flames lapped hungrily at the sturdy wooden wagon frames, wheels and shafts, swirled about madly, climbed high over the burning wagons, then they swooped downward, curling under them, attacking their deep underbellies. The flames crackled fiercely and billowed upward into the sky, lighting up the silent, trackless wastes for miles around.

A SCANT few miles away, the Mormon settlement of Penfield slept quietly and undisturbed. In the shadowy darkness at the entrance to the town, a black-hatted and black-bearded man sat motionlessly astride his horse. His eyes ranged upward to the leaping burst of flame that filled the sky, and his lips parted in a smile. He laughed softly and wheeled his mount. He glanced skyward again in a quick look over his shoulder; now the flames were tinged with smoke. He settled himself in the saddle, jerked the reins and the horse jogged away. They cantered into town, clattered the length of the darkened street. They halted presently in front of his house and Bishop Gould dismounted, and led his horse around the house to the rear.

Alvin Jessup's home was directly across the street. Jessup was still awake and at that particular moment he was standing at an upper-floor window at the rear of his house; the window opened upon the range with the foothills rearing themselves between the range and the desert. He watched with horrified fascination as the flames and the thickening smoke swirled about in the sky. He shook his head sadly.

"God help us," he whispered, and turned away.

He trudged heavily to an old bureau that occupied the wall space between the window and the door, fumbled in the darkness for a moment, then a candle flamed briefly with a dazzling yellowishness against the surrounding darkness. He opened a drawer in the bureau, drew out a letter and unfolded it gently and carefully beneath the candle's flickering light.

"I am bringing the Mormon gospel into Texas," he read in a slow, low tone that was filled with emotion. *"From the very onset of my journey, I have encountered unwillingness to listen, prejudice and in some cases threats of violence. As I progress deeper into the country, the gathering signs of hostility to my preachings increase like storm clouds, however I am undaunted.*

"I have a God-given duty to perform and if it is my fate to die for my beliefs, rest assured I shall not betray that trust even if it means my life.

"Reprisals against those who seek to halt us or destroy us cannot fail to hasten our end. I am aghast at the stories I have heard about the raids against the Gentiles who have encroached upon our territory. It is my belief that we of the Mormon faith must base our hopes for survival in this Gentile world on our ability to absorb and endure the very worst without resorting to reprisals. I shall never raise my hand to strike another man.

"If I should die in the performance of my duty, I beg of you, Alvin, to see to it that there is no thought of punishment for those responsible for my death. Religion does not countenance violence. . .if it would survive it must accept hardship and pain, it must be tolerant, completely understanding and forgiving. Above all, it must be consistent and steadfast.

"Your brother,
"Luther."

Alvin Jessup slowly returned the letter to the bureau drawer. . .slowly he closed the drawer, blew out the candle and retraced his steps to the

window. He looked skyward again. The flames had become a glow, softening in the night sky. He sank to his knees, bowed his head.

"O, Lord," he prayed. "We commit into thy keeping the souls of those whom we have sinned against and slain."

He clasped his hands and raised them to his chest, bowed his head a bit more. . .his voice faded away to an indistinct whisper as he continued with his prayer.

THE days that followed were long, uneventful days for Marshall; they were full, busy days for McLean and his band of men. Daily, at dawn, they rode forth to the country northward to continue with the laying-out of their farms, the building of their homes and barns. Anderson's place had yielded a surprising wealth of material for their use. . .a lean-to filled with tools that included a plow and other farm equipment, then a tarpaulin-covered pile of cut lumber. Pete Lester, riding the range west of the ranch, came upon a herd of nine cows.

"Mebbe they were Anderson's," Marshall said. "He did say somethin' about the Mormons runnin' off his stock and the chances are, the cows were among 'em. Go on, McLean. . . take 'em away. They b'long on a farm."

Crude cabins began to spring up on the newly taken-over land; the women, save the new mothers, installed themselves and with their coming, the cabins soon took on the appearance of habitable living quarters. With the women came their home-making implements. . .the huge prairie schooners and the equally cumbersome, high-wheeled farm wagons were driven into the new development, unloaded and the furniture carted into the cabins and left there to be placed to their best advantage by the settlers' wives. In surprisingly short order curtains appeared in the cabin windows; just as promptly, adding a further touch of realism to the scene, heavily laden wash lines, slung between uprights that bore a striking resemblance to wagon shafts, made their appearance.

It was a strange sight to behold when one rode northward to see a settler's wife perched atop a huge pile of rocks seemingly absorbed by the panorama below her; actually, she was scanning the range eastward for signs of the Mormons whose return appearance was expected at any time. When one came closer one quickly spied a sewing basket in the woman's lap and a rifle at her elbow. It was a return of the old frontier days, however it was a necessary vigil, one that had to be maintained continually. While the women mounted guard, their husbands toiled in the nearby fields.

In an amazingly short time the fields were plowed and planted, and the entire section of land between the ranch and the foothills was under cultivation. Riding northward through what had shortly before been virgin, untenanted country, it was heart-warming to see twisting spirals of chimney smoke curling lazily upward into the tranquil blue sky. Another frontier had been crossed and civilization had extended its reach.

It was late one afternoon when Marshall and Jerry Lake rode northward to see for themselves the progress the settlers were making. They followed a trail that skirted a ridge . . .below the ridge the open range spread away eastward as far as the eye could see. Jerry, in the lead, slowed his horse to a mere jog.

"Sure is beautiful country," he remarked.

Marshall did not answer. Jerry turned in his saddle. He was surprised to find that the black had halted.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

Marshall's face was grim.

"Look!" he said and pointed.

Jerry's eyes followed Marshall's pointing finger. Westward, probably three or four miles away, flames were climbing into the peaceful sky.

"Holy cow!" Lake muttered in awed tones. "Th' Mormons have come again!"

The black bolted away like a frightened deer. Jerry whirled his

horse around, dug his spurs into the animal's flanks.

"Wait f'r me!" he yelled.

His horse snorted loudly and thundered away in pursuit of the black.

CHAPTER IX

A Raid That Backfired

THE black flashed over the ground at a breathtaking pace and Jerry's horse soon fell so far behind that at first glance he appeared to have stopped running. . . a second glance, however, was reassuring. The horse hadn't stopped at all; in fact, he was still toiling as manfully as before, disregarding the widening gap between the black and himself, and striving in every way to overtake him. Jerry was considerably annoyed; he lashed his mount, spurred him, urged him on.

He looked up, noted that the black had slackened his swift pace; he saw Marshall whirl his horse around, saw him stand up in his stirrups and motion Jerry onward.

"Circle around and come up b'hind the place," he instructed. "I'll give you time t' get there, then I'll ride in. Mebbe we c'n catch th' hellions between us."

Jerry spurred his horse and raced away, swerving sharply to the south. He stole a quick look upward. . .the flames were still mounting. He shook his head grimly, tightened his grip on the reins. On they went and with each passing minute swept closer to the scene of the fire. . .minutes more and they flashed past it; Jerry managed to catch a fleeting, sidelong glimpse of a cabin with flames swirling all around it and cascading a shower of sparks into the air.

Fifty feet beyond it Jerry whirled his horse northward again, completing the encircling arc, then he pulled up and swung himself out of the saddle. Gun in hand, he plunged forward. . .there was a huge prairie schooner between the burning cabin and him and he dashed toward the wagon, came panting up to it and sagged against its backboard, huddled there for a minute while he fought to get his breath back.

Presently he inched his way to the very corner of the schooner and peered out cautiously. He breathed easier when he noticed that no one in the group of people some twenty feet ahead seemed to be looking in his direction. . .evidently he hadn't been detected. He nodded to himself, glanced at the flame-swept cabin. The crackling flames had muffled and drowned out his horse's hoof beats and his own foot steps.

His eyes shifted and narrowed. He saw a man sprawled out on the ground and a sobbing, kneeling woman bending over him. Just beyond them a dozen rifle-armed men stood by, looking on disinterestedly. Jerry's lips thinned. . .his hand tightened around his gun butt. His eyes flashed suddenly; he saw Marshall come riding into view. The men turned quickly, their rifles snapping upward. A burly man with his rifle slung over his shoulder and a swagger of authority in his lumbering stride, shouldered his way out of the group and trudged forward. The black halted in front of him.

"Who're you?" Jerry heard the man demand in a rough voice.

"I'll ask you the same question," Marshall replied and Jerry grinned. "What's goin' on here?"

The burly man jerked his rifle off his shoulder.

"Get down off that horse," he commanded.

He moved closer to the black, stopped within arm's reach of Marshall's stirrup.

"Sure," Marshall said easily.

He swung himself gracefully out of the saddle, dropped lightly to the ground. There was a movement among the other men and Jerry's watchful eyes shifted as did his gun. The suspicious movement proved to be nothing but a shifting from one foot to another and Jerry turned again, and just in time, too, to see the man reach for the black's bridle. As he did, Marshall, only inches away from the man, suddenly twisted and in what appeared to be part of the same movement, brought his

right knee upward swiftly, drove it into the pit of the man's rather ample stomach.

The man gasped painfully and his rifle flew out of his hands. Marshall struck him a smashing blow squarely in the face. The man staggered, crumpled and crashed heavily to the ground. Now there was a general movement among the man's companions.

"Hold it!" Jerry yelled and dashed forward.

HE FIRED twice, over their heads, and all movement ceased abruptly.

"Drop your guns!" he yelled.

Eleven Mormon rifles slipped to the ground. Jerry halted, looked up, caught Marshall's eye and grinned broadly.

"Awright, partner," he called. "The show's all yourn again!"

Marshall laughed. He kicked the burly man's rifle aside, bent over him, pulled him over on his broad back and jerked a gun out of the man's waist band. He straightened up and tossed the gun away.

"Now then," Marshall began.

In the distance there was a sudden thunder of horses' hoofs. Marshall glanced at the outstretched man at his feet, backed away and wheeled. His hands dropped to his gun butts. Jerry, watching Marshall, holstered his gun, bent down and caught up an armful of Mormon rifles, wheeled like a flash and sprinted toward the prairie schooner. He dropped the rifles beside the wagon, dashed forward again, returned presently with another armful and dropped them beside the others.

The schooner, he had evidently decided, would provide excellent cover for them should the approaching horsemen prove to be Mormons, too. Marshall signalled and the black wheeled and jogged away. The clatter of hoofs swelled. . .in another minute a band of horsemen came sweeping into view. Marshall eyed them sharply. His hands came away from his gun butts.

He stepped forward now and waited. Six horsemen thundered up, halted in a dust-raising stop in front of him, McLean swung to the ground.

"What's happened here?" he asked quickly. "Saw th' flames and rounded up some o' th' boys and come hustlin' over quick's we could."

"Mormons," Marshall said simply.

"Uh-huh. . .that's what I figgered."

McLean's eyes ranged past him, over the smouldering and now smoking cabin, over the Mormons. . .the kneeling woman and the man who had been sprawled out on the ground were on their feet now. As McLean watched, they turned slowly and trudged away toward the prairie schooner.

"They the ones who did it?" McLean asked, nodding toward the Mormons.

"Yep," Marshall replied. "Where's that lumber wagon o' yourn?"

McLean turned to him, eyed him questioningly.

"Left it over at Turner's place. Why d'you ask?"

Marshall grinned.

"Bein' that we got so danged much help around here now," he said, "I kinda figgered that if that lumber was handy, we could build a mighty swell cabin in place o' the one that's burnin' itself into ashes."

"You mean. . ."

"Sure. Eleven Mormons. . ."

"What about that polecat there?" McLean asked, nodding toward the burly man on the ground.

"Reckon I forgot about him. Twelve Mormons with nothing t' do oughta be able t' do heaps once we kinda pointed out to 'em that they might live longer if they did somethin' worthwhile."

McLean's eyes twinkled.

"You might have somethin' there, Marshall," he said. He wheeled. "Mike!"

A horseman edged his mount forward.

"Mike," McLean said with a grim grin. "Parker'll need a new cabin now. Marshall here got th' idea that we oughta make them Mormons build 'im a new one."

The man named Mike laughed.

"That's a doggoned swell idea," he

said. "That's gettin' square with th' Mormons th' best way I know. What d'you want me t' do?"

"The lumber wagon's back at Turner's place. Suppose you ride back there and drive it up here, huh?"

"Sure thing. I'll get a heck uva boot outta watchin' them skunks buildin' somethin' f'r someb'dy b'sides themselves. I won't be long."

MIKE wheeled his horse, spurred him and dashed away. Marshall stepped past McLean, halted beside Boyle who was showing signs of returning to consciousness.

"Awright," Marshall said curtly. "Climb up on your hind legs, Mister."

Boyle struggled into a sitting position. There was a blood smear on his lips, an angry red welt on his jaw. He raised his head and looked up at Marshall.

"Get up."

The burly man glared at him. He climbed slowly to his feet. He hitched up his pants, put his hands to his waist band.

"I lifted your gun," Marshall said. "Didn't want you t' hurt y'self with it."

Boyle's eyes gleamed.

"G'wan," Marshall commanded. "Get over there with the rest o' your gang."

Boyle turned slowly; he shot a murderous glare at Marshall over his shoulder.

"Move," Marshall snapped.

The burly man trudged off.

* * *

It was dawn, a cold, grey, drab dawn, when Bishop Gould rode slowly down the street. He reached the end of it when another horseman came whirling into town. The man spied the Bishop, jerked his lathered horse to a stiff-legged halt, wheeled him and clattered over to the Bishop's side.

"Morning, Bishop."

"Good morning. Where's Boyle?"

The man eased himself in his saddle.

"'Fraid you won't be seein' Boyle or the others f'r a spell," he said.

Bishop Gould's eyebrows arched.

"N-o? And why not?"

"They're pris'ners. . .that's why."

The Bishop frowned.

"We found a bunch o' Gentiles settled fr'm Anderson's place clear back t' th' hills."

"Indeed!"

The man nodded.

"That's a fact, Bishop. They've got their cabins up an' fields plowed like they were there t' stay. And there's more o' th'm there than you'll be willin' t' believe. Anyway, soon's we spotted 'em we went t' work on 'em. We s'rrounded one place. It was plumb easy. There was on'y one feller there and his wife."

The Bishop gestured impatiently. "Go on, man," he commanded. "Go on with your story."

"Wa-al, like I said, we closed in on this place, corraled th' man an' th' woman and set fire to their cabin. Boyle said that afterw'rds we'd put th' torch t' whatever they were growin' there. Boyle an' th' man had words an' Boyle laid 'im out with a clip over th' head."

The man paused, pushed his hat back from his eyes. "All uva sudden some more o' th' settlers showed up, s'rrounded us, and one big feller, th' leader he was, a big feller all in black an' ridin' th' biggest black horse I ever saw, kneed Boyle an' hit him a wallop that danged near killed 'im."

"Is that the whole story?"

"Nope. . .there's a mite more. They made us drop our guns, brought up a big wagon full o' lumber an' told us t' get t' work buildin' a new cabin or else. They built a lotta fires all around so's we could see what we were doin' and told us t' go ahead. Boyle acted up again and he c'llected th' dangedest two-fisted wallopin' fr'm that big feller in black that you ever saw. His hull face was outta whack. It looked like a bunch o' steers'd stampeded over 'im."

"Go on."

"Reckon by now th' new cabin's well nigh finished. B'lieve me, Bishop, it was awright, too. It's a

heap bigger an' better'n th' one we burned down."

"How did you effect your escape?"

"I didn't," the man said bluntly. "They let me go."

THE Bishop's eyebrows arched again. "Indeed!"

"That's right. That big feller I've been tellin' you about, wa-al, sir, he says you know 'im. His name's Marshall."

"Marshall?" Bishop Gould repeated. He shook his head. "I'm afraid he is very much mistaken. However, I shall look forward to meeting him."

"He said in case you didn't know 'im by name, I was t' tell you that he was th' feller you an' some others horsewhipped one mornin'."

"O-h, I see. Yes, Edwards, I do know the fellow."

"That's what he said."

"But why did this man allow you to go free?"

"I'm comin' to that, Bishop."

"Well?"

"He give me a message for you."

Bishop Gould's face clouded.

"A message, eh?"

Edwards shifted uncomfortably under the Bishop's piercing eyes.

"He said he wanted you t' know where Boyle an' th' others are, an' that if you wanted th'm, f'r you t' come an' get th'm."

"Was that. . .all he said?"

"Mostly. He started t' say somethin' about a girl named Dora. . ."

"Dora?" the Bishop echoed. "The convert girl?"

"Dunno, Bishop."

"What did he say about her?"

"Wa-al, he said. . .'you c'n tell that black-bearded devil that if anything happens t' her, I'll. . .!"

"Yes?"

"He stopped 'imself an' told me t' get goin'. I did, b'lieve me, Bishop, b'fore he changed 'is mind."

The frown on the Bishop's face deepened. Edwards settled himself in his saddle.

"Reckon I'll go on home now an' get me somethin' to eat an' mebbe a couple o' hours' sleep."

Bishop Gould did not reply. Edwards wheeled his horse. . .he gave the Bishop a sidelong glance, spurred his horse and loped up the street. As he clattered past Alvin Jessup's house, the Elder appeared at a window. Jessup peered out. . .he recognized Edwards as he rode by.

"One of Boyle's ruffians," he muttered. "I wonder what deviltry they've been up to this early."

He turned and looked down the street. At the very end of the street he could see a motionless horseman. Jessup's lips moved.

"The devil incarnate," he muttered. "Heaven help those against whom he is plotting."

When Bishop Gould rode slowly out of town, Jessup shook his head and came away from the window.

CHAPTER X

Blood On the Sun

JAKE HAMLIN, lean and tall and dirty-looking, was idling in the open doorway of his shack at the base of the foothills, some thirty miles north of Penfield, when Bishop Gould rode up. Jake's bushy eyebrows arched, evidence that his caller was probably the very last person he had ever expected to see there. That the Bishop's visit indicated that there was something of importance afoot, Jake was immediately aware. He straightened up, wiped his mouth with his tattered shirt sleeve, hitched up his pants and went forward.

"'Mornin', Bishop," he said with an awkward half salute. "Glad t' see you."

Bishop Gould eased himself in his saddle.

"Good morning, Jake," he said, and swung himself upward and out of the saddle.

Jake's be-mustached mouth twisted in an effort to conceal the smile of amusement on his face. . .the Bishop appeared to experience some difficulty in freeing his right foot from the stirrup; Jake stepped forward quickly, steadied the bearded man, reached up and guided Gould's free foot to the ground. With an effort, the Bishop managed to free the other

foot. . .Jake stepped back quickly. When the Bishop straightened up, Jake turned away, halted presently. He hooked his big thumbs in his belt.

"This is kinda outta th' way f'r you," he said casually. "Ain't it? Don't ever r'member you comin' all th' way up here b'fore."

Bishop Gould's eyes strayed past Jake to the latter's shack.

"I'da invited yuh inside right off," Jake said, then he grinned toothlessly. "On'y knowin' how all-fired fussy you Mormon folks are f'r havin' things just so, I figgered it'd be a heap better if I didn't even mention it an' just stayed put out here."

The bearded man turned to him.

"Jake," he began. "I need your help."

Hamlin grinned again.

"Knew you didn't come thirty miles just f'r th' ride," he answered.

The Bishop's eyes went down. . . he spied a tiny streak of dust on his coat lapel; he frowned, whipped out his handkerchief, a huge square of white linen, wiped his lapel clean, returned the handkerchief to his inner coat pocket, then he looked up again.

"Jake," he began again. "This is very important, probably the most important assignment I have ever entrusted to you."

The former nodded.

"In view of its importance, you will be recompensed handsomely, far better than ever before."

"Sounds interestin' so far, Bishop."

Gould cleared his throat.

"I am informed," he continued, "that the richest wagon train to attempt the desert crossing is some two hundred miles from Penfield. A few days more should see it emerge from the desert."

"Uh-huh. . .and?"

"I understand, Jake, that in the train is a money wagon which carries a huge trunk containing more than ninety thousand dollars in cash. Jewelry and diamonds in their owners' possession should come to about forty thousand dollars."

Jake whistled softly.

"That's sure a heap o' money," he mused.

"Ten thousand of it would be yours," the Bishop said quietly. He smiled quickly. "Jake, have you ever seen ten thousand dollars?"

"I've had a hundred," Jake said and he grinned again.

"And you've had a good time on the hundred, haven't you?"

"An' how!"

"We-ll, think of what a time you'd have with ten thousand!"

"I'm thinkin, awright!"

"KEEP it in mind. Jake, that wagon train must be wiped out."

"Uh-huh. What you got cooked up?"

The Bishop smiled.

"I'd like the Paiutes to do the job," he said quietly. "That's why I've come to you."

Jake's grin vanished.

"Th' Paiutes, eh?" he repeated thoughtfully.

"Yes," Bishop Gould said. "The Indians could have everything they wanted, from pianos and furniture to. . ."

"Yeah?"

"To scalps."

Jake nodded thoughtfully.

"It'd be a natur'l, awright, f'r th' Indians t' do a job like that," he said presently. "Nob'dy would ever figger any whites were mixed up in it."

"Exactly."

"A job like this one oughta be done as far out in th' desert as possible," Jake went on. He rubbed his bristly chin with a dirty-nailed finger. The Bishop eyed him patiently. "That bein' th' case, it oughta be done t'night, if I c'n get th' Paiutes t' do it at all."

"They must do it."

"I know, Bishop. Gener'lly, I c'n get 'em t' do anything I ask 'em to."

"You've a great deal to offer them, Jake."

"Uh-huh. Awright, Bishop. . .you leave everything t' me. I'll go see 'em right away an' get things set."

"There must be no bungling."

Jake grinned evilly.

"Th' Paiutes are anythin' but bunglers, Bishop. I know 'em. . .I've lived with 'em on an' off f'r years.

They're cute, an' when they do a job, b'lieve me, they do it right."

Bishop Gould reached for the bridle. . .he pushed his left foot into the stirrup, caught hold of the saddle horn and pulled himself up. He settled himself deeply in the saddle.

"One thing more, Jake."

"Yeah?"

"I've always kept my word to you, haven't I?"

"You ain't never heard me squawk, have you?" Jake retorted.

"No. I expect you to play square with me in this matter."

Jake looked up at him. "Th' money box won't be touched, Bishop, 'cept by you. . .if that's what y'mean 'bout me playin' square with you."

The Bishop wheeled his horse.

"Oh, yes, Jake. . ."

"I'm listenin'."

"Make no attempt to see me or contact me in any way. Is that clear?"

"I'll wait 'till you get in touch with me, Bishop."

The bearded man nodded, gripped the reins. . .he spurred his horse, sent him loping away. Jake Hamlin turned on his heel, trudged back to his shack. He thrust his hand inside, drew out a rifle and slung it over his shoulder, pulled the door shut and tramped around the shack to the rear. A minute later he reappeared astride his horse. He debated something with himself for a moment, then, his mind evidently made up, he rode away northward into the foothills.

THE wagon train seemed never-ending. . .a long, curving, twisting line of huge, lumbering prairie schooners and high-wheeled farm wagons that wound wearily over the steaming desert like a far-stretching tow-line. At the head of the train toiled a most unusual sight, a sleek, delicate-looking surrey. The wagon wheels creaked dismally, bit deeply into the sand, churned about furiously and lumbered forward heavily; the surrey's dainty wheels crunched and rolled lightly onward. A whip cracked explosively somewhere along the line and its pistol-like report echoed over the wastes. A baby cried and a dog barked. . .both were quiet again presently, then the dreary, heavy-handed stillness deepened over the desert. There were no echoing sounds now, nothing but the monotonous creaking of the huge wheels and the swishing and crunching of the surrey's wheels.

The train spread away for more than a mile. . .there were some seventy wagons in line and more than two hundred men, women and children aboard them. In the very middle of the train some nine hundred head of cattle plodded along. The travelers were for the most part Arkansans, however there were a handful of Missourians in the party, too. The latter, louder-voiced than their companions, carried on most of the conversations, that is, when camp was pitched and the toll-taking heat had been replaced by the usual night breezes. During the day, practically everyone kept within the protective shadows of the wagons' canvas. . .it was only at night when they emerged.

The leader of the train was a gaunt, tight-lipped man. . .Captain Abel Hawks. . .who had ridden the Texas and Oklahoma ranges for many years. Everyone wondered about Hawks. . .during the day he was always at the head of the cavalcade, riding far in advance of the train astride a great, deep-chested horse that seemed as tireless as his master.

At night Hawks was continually on the move, loping up and down along the line of drawn-up wagons. He had them brought up close together with the shafts of each wagon pulled up beneath the belly of the wagon in front of it. . .at the ends of the line he swung the wagons around so as to provide a huge rectangular space within the confines of the canvas-topped vehicles from which he could control its defenses. He supervised the posting of guards and saw to it, too, that they did not relax their vigil. Everyone marveled at his endurance. . .they wondered how he could go without sleep and still continue to be so energetic and alert.

The surrey belonged to portly

John Simmons whose money had helped finance the expedition. The schooner that lumbered along directly behind the surrey was Simmons', too. He used it for his sleeping quarters. His family, rumor had it, had been wiped out in a fire. . .surviving it were Simmons and his three-year-old grandchild, a chubby little fellow who spent most of his time in his grandfather's ample lap. Sometimes when Simmons dozed off, Captain Hawks would come cantering back. . .he would pull up alongside the surrey, grin at the youngster, hold out his arms and lift the boy into the saddle, then they would ride away to the Captain's usual daytime post, about a quarter of a mile ahead of the train.

AT SUNDOWN, when the cool evening breezes droned over the desert, Captain Hawks would call a halt. It was he who selected the camp site. . .actually there was little choice in the matter for the desert was fairly flat and one spot was generally as good as another. He would halt, wheel his horse and wait . . .everyone knew what that meant. When the surrey and the lead schooner would pull up alongside him, he would nod. . .there was a general quickening all along the line to get into halting place. He would ride back, stopping briefly here and there to see that everything was in order. . .presently everyone would pile out of the wagons.

The strain of the day was over. Now everyone was gay and lighthearted. The mules and the oxen would be unhitched, led into the inner circle of the drawn-up wagons. They were generally too tired to wander off, however, as a precaution, in case of a sudden attack when their milling about might cause panic if not interference with the train's defenders, they would be tied to the huge wheels. Water was doled out to them for there was no over-supply of it; they were fed, then they were promptly and completely forgotten for the night.

Camp-fires seemed to spring up all over the encampment. Everyone gathered around them, young and old alike, and soon, too, the savory goodness of cooking filled the evening air. Evening on the desert seemed to be unusually short-lived. . .night came on swiftly and with the deepening darkness, the camp soon settled down. Tired women and children returned to their wagons; the men lingered around the fires, to talk a bit longer and to enjoy a last smoke. There were frequent squeals and cries of protestation from some of the wagons. . .signs that the children were being washed before being put to bed. The men recognized the howls and grinned and promptly went on talking.

Presently there were no more cries. The talk around the fires fell away. Men smoked in silence, their thoughts probably about the long journey that still lay ahead of them, and of California. Here and there a man yawned and stretched himself, hitched up his belt and looked skyward. . .and slowly sauntered away. In the blackness of the night a dog barked. . .a gruff voice rebuked him and the dog was silent again.

Captain Hawks halted his horse alongside John Simmons' wagon. Simmons was perched on the driver's seat, relaxed, puffing quietly on his pipe.

"How much longer, Abel?" he asked.

"O-h, reckon another couple o' days oughta do it," Hawks replied. He grinned lightly. "Desert ain't as big as some folks'd have you b'lieve."

"It's big enough for me," Simmons growled.

Hawks laughed softly, wheeled his horse and rode off. Far down along the line of towering wagons he spied a slim, coated figure emerge from between two schooners. He spurred his mount, dashed up. . .the girl stopped, looked up quickly. Hawks reined in.

"Evenin', Miss Hall," he said, touching his hat brim.

"Good evening, Captain Hawks."

"I wouldn't go too far off," Hawks advised, "if I was you. This is still th' desert, y'know, an' things c'n hap-

pen out here a heap quicker'n you might expect 'em to."

"I won't go very far."

He watched her quietly for a moment. She buttoned her coat, whipped up the collar around her neck, dug her hands into the coat's deep pockets. She looked up at him again presently.

"Captain, have you ever heard of a man named Marshall?" she asked.

"Marshall?" he repeated thoughtfully. "Can't say that I have. What's 'is first name?"

"Ned," she replied. "However, very few people seem to know it. To most of them he's simply Marshall."

"Uh-huh. . .an' what's he look like?"

"O-h, he's big and strong. . .and good looking."

Hawks laughed lightly. "You don't say? Anything else outstandin' about 'im?"

"He's said to be deadly with a Colt."

"Oh, yeah? Marshall, eh. . .an' right handy with a gun. He must be quite a man, Miss Hall, if he's all that you say he is."

"He always dressed in black and always rode a big black horse," she added.

"Wait a minute, now," Hawks said quickly. "Heard a couple o' fellers talkin' in a saloon one day 'bout some lawm'n who'd. . .doggone it!"

"What is it, Captain?"

HE SHOOK his head. "Reckon that proves I'm gettin' old awright. I was tryin' t' think o' th' name o' th' place, but I'm danged if I c'n r'member it. Anyway, they were talkin' 'bout how this lawm'n had cleaned up th' place an' how he'd chased th' bad men plumb outta town an' practic'lly all by 'imself, too, when one o' them happened t' look outta th' window. 'There he goes now!' he says, an' when th' others walked over, I did, too. Reckon I'm as curious as th' next. Besides, after hearin' about this fire-eatin' hombre, I was more'n just curious t' see what he looked like."

"You saw him?"

"On'y fr'm th' back. He was a big feller, awright, and he was dressed in black, an' what makes it even funnier, Miss. . .I'm doggoned if he wasn't ridin' th' biggest an' blackest horse I ever saw!"

"His name. . .did they mention it?"

Captain Hawks nodded.

"It was Marshall awright. Seems like he'd been asked t' stay on there as Sheriff but that he'd turned down th' job b'cause he was headin' f'r California. That's th' hull story, Miss Hall. Leastways that's all I heard b'cause I finished my drink an' hightailed it. Wa-al, reckon I better get goin' again. R'member what I said 'bout not wanderin' off too far."

He rode away. . .the sand crunched and swished beneath his horse's hoofs.

The girl plodded away into the darkness. She heard a low whistle, whirled instantly, stiffened in fright . . .a shadowy figure leaped upon her, bore her backward. She screamed and a heavy hand was clapped over her mouth. She struggled, lost her footing and went down to her knees. She broke away somehow, scrambled to her feet. . .dozens of shadowy figures rose up all around her, dashed past her. Blood-curdling screams and shouts filled the air. . .rifle fire boomed behind her with ear-splitting thunder.

She stumbled away blindly, sobbing. . .a heavy hand caught her by the arm, whirled her around. Her captor's arm flashed upward. . . something thudded cruelly on her head and she crumpled, collapsed limply.

A tall, gaunt man with a rifle in his hands came plunging over the sands. Half a dozen figures with long knives gleaming in the night light dashed forward to meet him. He gripped the rifle by the barrel, swung it over his head like a club . . .a knife, thrown at him, struck him in the chest. He gasped and staggered. . .lithe figures swarmed over him, tore his rifle out of his hands. He was shoved backward. . . knives were plunged into him. He cried out. His attackers stepped back

and he fell forward on his hands and knees. A knife-wielder hurled himself upon Captain Hawks. . .the blade flashed upward, then downward viciously into his back, pinning him to the sand. His attacker jerked his knife out of Hawks' back, climbed to his feet, wheeled and raced toward the wagon train.

CHAPTER XI
The Women

IT WAS shortly before dawn when Jake Hamlin with the unconscious form of Carol Hall in his arms appeared at Bishop Gould's home. It was the Bishop himself, a strange figure in a long night-shirt that hung low over his boots and almost concealed his pants tucked into his boot-tops, who opened the door. He stared at Jake for a moment, then his lips tightened. His beard seemed to stiffen, too.

"What are you doing here?" he rasped.

Jake shifted his limp burden.

"It might be smarter f'r you t' lemme come inside," he said coolly, "b'fore th' hull town wakes up an' hears you."

Gould frowned. He opened the door wide, glared at Jake as the latter pushed past him into the kitchen. His frown deepened. He suddenly became aware of the girl in Jake's arms.

"Who in heaven's name is that?" he demanded.

Jake did not reply. He simply looked around the room. The Bishop closed the door.

"Who is this girl?" he demanded again.

"Lemme put 'er down somewheres," Jake answered calmly, "then I c'n tell yuh. She's been hurt an' needs some lookin' after."

"Come along," Gould commanded.

He strode across the kitchen to another door, opened it. Jake followed him up a flight of stairs. On the landing he motioned to Jake to wait, then he went quickly to a closed door and knocked on it.

"Dora!"

There was no reply. The Bishop rapped a second time.

"Dora!"

There was a movement behind the door, a quick step. . .the door opened.

"Y-es?"

Bishop Gould turned. "Bring her in here."

Jake nodded, carried Carol forward. Dora, a startled look on her young face, drew a blanket closer around her; she looked from Jake to Gould then to the motionless figure in Jake's arms.

"Ain't nuthin' t' be scared uv," Jake said reassuringly. "She'll come to bye 'n bye. All you gotta do is keep 'n eye on 'er."

"Put her down on the bed," the Bishop commanded from the doorway.

Dora stepped back. . .Jake strode directly to the bed, deposited Carol upon it, looked up and grinned.

"Reckon that's that," he said.

"Come along," Gould said gruffly.

Jake turned, nodded to Dora and trudged out. He closed the door quietly behind him, followed the Bishop downstairs to the kitchen.

"Well?" the latter demanded.

JAKE perched himself on the edge of the table. When Bishop Gould's beard jerked ominously, Jake quickly got to his feet.

"Found her near th' wagon train," he began. "She was out cold. Someb'dy must've give her a good wallop over th' head."

Gould's eyes blazed. "So you brought her here!"

Jake shrugged his shoulders. "It was better'n leavin' 'er where she was f'r someb'dy else t' find so's she could spill everything she knows 'bout th' raid," he retorted.

"Indeed!"

"'Course. This way she's right where you c'n see to it that she don't do 'ny talkin'."

The Bishop paced the floor.

"Why didn't the Indians finish her off?" he flung over his shoulder. "Then we wouldn't have had anything to worry about. She would have been out of the way."

Jake did not answer. Bishop Gould

halted, turned to him again.

"Were there any other survivors?" he demanded.

"Nope."

Gould seemed to breathe easier.

"Good. And the money chest?"

Jake grinned broadly.

"I got that awright. I didn't even mention it to th' Indians, so they didn't even know it was there an' didn't look f'r it."

The Bishop nodded approvingly.

"Where is it now?" he asked.

"Buried it away. Nob'dy could ever find it, b'lieve me. When you say th' word, we'll dig it up," Jake explained. He dug into his pocket, drew out a handful of glittering bits of jewelry. "Here y'are."

Bishop Gould stepped forward and held out his hands. Jake dropped the jewelry into them. Gould looked up, eyed him sharply.

"Th' Paiutes got th' rest," Jake said evenly.

Gould frowned.

"They got th' stuff b'fore I got there so there wasn't anything I could do about it. I suppose I coulda made a stink about it but I wasn't that anxious t' have 'em add my scalp t' th' c'llection they had a'ready. Anyway, we got th' cash an' that's worth a heap more'n th' other stuff."

Gould made no comment. Jake straightened up. He hooked his big thumbs in his belt.

"Bishop," he began.

"Yes?"

"How much o' that dough am I s'pposed t' get?"

The Bishop eyed him coldly.

"Ten thousand dollars," he said curtly.

Jake grinned toothlessly. He shook his head slowly.

"Ain't enough," he said calmly.

"I see."

"We're gonna split it even, right down th' middle."

Gould's eyes narrowed.

"If I were you, Jake," he said quietly. "I'd take the ten thousand and be satisfied."

"Half o' ninety thousan' is forty-five thousand," Jake said equally quietly. "That's what I want."

"Go on."

"That's all. Is it a deal?"

Bishop Gould smiled gently.

"Of course, Jake."

"Huh?" Jake's eyes widened. "You mean you ain't sore, that you don't think I'm tryin' t' hold you up or somethin'?"

"Not at all. We've been friends a long, long time. I want you to be completely happy in our business relations. Since you feel that you are entitled to share evenly in this money, then by all means, Jake, forty-five thousand dollars you shall have."

Jake bit his lip.

Gould laughed softly. "What's the matter? I've agreed to your terms, but instead of showing your pleasure at my acceptance, you look rather dubious."

There was a curious gleam in Jake's eyes.

"I'da liked it better," he said quietly, "if you'da said 'no'."

The Bishop's eyebrows arched.

"I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do, Bishop. I know you better'n you think."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Th' minute you agreed t' let me have half o' that money, I knew what was goin' on in your mind. If I'da asked f'r th' hull ninety thousan' you'da agreed t' that, too. But you ain't foolin' me none, not by a jugfull. A'ready you got it figgered out how an' when I'm gonna wind up with a bullet in my gizzard. F'r all I know, mebbe I was gonna get a slug instead o' th' ten thousan' anyway. Now that I'm askin' f'r more, I'm sure uv it. You know same's I do that you ain't givin' up that extra thirty-five thousan' just like that. All your smilin' an' soft talk ain't foolin' ol' Jake a-tall. You're willin' to agree t' anything long's I've got th' dough an' you don't even know where it is. But once you do know. . ."

"Yes?"

"That'll be th' end o' me. There's on'y one thing that might make you stop an' think twice b'fore you do 'nything rash, Bishop."

"I'm listening, Jake."

"If you do 'nything that looks a-tall suspicious t' me, Bishop, you'll never see a cent o' that dough.

What's more, an' I wasn't even gonna mention this. . .I've got me a letter writ."

Gould's eyes were steely. "A letter, Jake?"

Hamlin grinned evilly.

"Uh-huh. . .an' it's t' someb'dy in Salt Lake City," he said significantly. "I've got everything in it, beginnin' with th' very first job I done f'r you, an' it winds up with this wagon train affair. Wrote it yeste'day after I come back fr'm seein' th' Paiutes. It'd sure make interestin' readin', b'lieve me."

He hitched up his belt, nodded and trudged to the door, opened it.

"Be seein' you, Bishop," he called over his shoulder.

"Wait a minute, Jake," Gould called.

Hamlin halted in the open doorway and looked back.

"Yeah?"

The Bishop looked at him for a moment, then he smiled and shook his head.

"Never mind," he said. "Run along. I'll be up to see you again in a few days."

"Sure," Jake said and went out.

IT WAS evening when Bishop Gould rapped lightly on the door to Dora's room. She opened it at once, noiselessly, and pressed her finger against her lips.

"Is she asleep?" Gould asked in a low tone.

Dora nodded.

"Come downstairs," he commanded. "I've something to say to you."

"Now?"

"Yes."

He turned on his heel, returned to the kitchen. Dora appeared minutes later.

"Sit down, my dear," Gould said. There were chairs grouped around the table. Dora selected one on the far side. He waited until she had seated herself, then he sat down facing her. He smiled at her gently. "You are a very lovely young woman, Dora."

She flushed and averted her eyes.

"Dora," he said presently. "Things are shaping themselves beautifully, in fact, far better than I had dared hope. Penfield and the surrounding country are already mine. Soon I shall strike for all of Utah. I shall be the head of the Mormon church. Once installed, I shall seek other worlds to conquer. There are other States, bordering States, and in them I shall install my puppets. My power will spread until my word will be law. I shall build a kingdom in which I shall be king, and you, my dear, will be my queen."

She raised her head, stared hard at him. He laughed softly.

"It staggers you, leaves you speechless. But when it becomes a reality, you will know what it means to be the wife of William Gould. You alone shall have everything every woman dreams of but never gets . . .power and money and jewels. The world will wait at your feet. It will move swiftly to obey your every wish, your every command. Dora, I have waited for you to embrace Mormonism willingly. I can wait no longer. We shall be married on Sunday."

Her eyes widened. He slid a jeweled pin across the table.

"It is for you, my dear. Wear it."

He pushed his chair back from the table, climbed to his feet. . .Dora arose, too.

"The pin," he said. "You're forgetting it."

She looked down at it. He frowned, came around the table. When she picked it up, a smile returned to his face. She turned slowly toward the door.

"Dora," he said and she stopped.

He came swiftly to her side. He caught her by the arms, turned her around. . .then she was in his arms and he bent quickly to kiss her lips. She struggled, pushed at him frantically. . .he laughed softly, delightedly. He bent his head again. Her right hand flashed upward, across his face. . .he released her at once, put his hand to his face. When he looked at his fingers, there was blood on them. He whirled around but Dora had gone. He heard her race upstairs, heard her door slam shut.

DORA quickly locked her door. She turned, pantingly. Carol was awake. . .her eyes were fixed on Dora.

"Oh!" Dora gasped. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to burst in on you like this!"

She came forward to the bed.

"Do you feel all right now?" she asked.

Carol smiled up at her. "Y-es," she answered. "Save for a terrible throbbing in my head."

Dora seated herself on the edge of the bed.

"I've been bathing your head," she said. "Perhaps I'd better continue."

"Wait," Carol said. "That pin in your hand. May I see it, please?"

"Of course."

Dora handed it to her.

"May I ask how long you've had this, and where you got it?"

"Bishop Gould just gave it to me," Dora replied.

Carol turned the pin over in her hands.

"Can you turn up that lamplight just a little?" she asked.

"I lit it before I went downstairs," Dora explained. "I was afraid to turn it up too brightly for fear of waking you."

The lamp stood atop a bureau midway between the door and the bed. Dora went to it. . .the light brightened, then she came back to the bed.

"That better?" she asked with a smile.

"Much better, thank you," Carol replied. She handed Dora the pin. "My name is Carol Hall. Can you read the initials on the back of the pin?"

"I'll try," Dora said. She studied them for a moment. "Yes. . .C. H."

"Carol Hall," Carol said quietly.

"Then. . .then it's yours!"

"I recognized it," Carol explained. "That's why I asked to see it."

"I don't understand. How could the Bishop have gotten it?"

"I don't know. I do know, however, that I was wearing it the night the wagon train was attacked. If you'll look closely at my dress, you'll see the tiny pin holes. Evidently, judging from the rip, the pin was torn from my dress!"

CHAPTER XII

Phantom Horsemen

MARSHALL pulled up at the corral gate. He twisted around in the saddle when he heard his name called. Jerry Lake came running from the house, sprinted past the bunkhouse and panted up to him.

"Got somethin' t' tell you," Jerry wheezed.

"Take it easy," Marshall cautioned. "You ain't as young as you used t' be, y'know."

He grinned and swung himself out of the saddle.

"Big wagon train comin' across th' desert," Jerry panted. "Wiped out by Indians."

Marshall eyed him sharply.

"Oh, yeah? How'd you come t' hear about it?" he asked.

"One feller got away," Lake answered. "He's in th' house now."

"Uh-huh."

"Pete an' me rode out tow'rd Penfield this mornin'," Jerry continued. "Just f'r th' hell uv it, y'know."

"Lucky you didn't run into some Mormons," Marshall said dryly. "Or did you?"

"That ain't what happened a-tall."

"Awright, awright. . .what did happen?"

"Gimme a chance t' tell you. We circled wide aroun' th' town an' we were just turnin' back when Pete spies a feller ridin' a mule through th' Pass that leads outta th' desert. We wait f'r this feller t' reach us. When he comes closer we see there's somethin' wrong with 'im. He keeps swayin' fr'm side t' side like he was likkered up. 'Course that didn't make sense, so we spurred up an' ranged alongside uv 'im."

Marshall was listening attentively now.

"There was blood all over 'im, fr'm his head down to 'is hands. I'm dogoned, Marshall, if th' next minute he don't keel over. Pete give me a hand and we prop 'im up on the sad-

dle in front o' me an' we bring 'im here."

"Uh-huh. . .an' how's he doin' now?"

"O-h, we fixed 'im up best we could an' got 'im into bed, figgerin' sleep was th' best thing for 'im. I just looked in on 'im, just b'fore you come along, an' he was doin' awright f'r 'imself. He was sittin' up in bed an' Pete was feedin' 'im a bowl o' mush. You wanna see 'im, Marshall?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Now, or d'you wanna unsaddle th' black first?"

"Th' black c'n wait."

They strode up to the house, trudged through the kitchen to the tiny bedroom at the rear; the door was ajar and they halted in the doorway and looked in. Pete was smoothing a pillow behind the injured man who was sitting up. . .he raised his bandaged head and grinned. He was young and husky looking.

"You fellers are sure spoilin' me," he said. "'Fraid I'm never gonna be satisfied again t' hafta feed m'self. Someb'dy's gonna hafta do it for me."

Jerry grinned and pushed past Marshall.

"Ryan, this feller is Marshall. He owns this place."

"Howdy," the youth said. "I'm sure obliged t' you, Mister, f'r puttin' me up, an' t' these two fellers. They've been swell t' me."

Marshall came into the room.

"That's th' first bit o' work they've done since they came here," he said with a grin. "All they've been doin' is eatin' an' sleepin'. 'Bout time they took care o' somebody besides th'm-selves."

"He don't mean that," Jerry said. "He hired us just t' keep him comp'ny doin' nuthin'. We're holdin' up our end o' th' bargain. Now he's prob'bly figgerin' we've about ate him outta all th' supplies he had."

"STARTIN' next week we're gonna live on what we c'n find or borrow," Marshall said winking at Ryan.

"Ryan," Jerry said. "I told Marshall that th' Indians wiped out th' rest o' th' folks in th' train. That's right, ain't it?"

"Wa-al, no. . .not exactly."

"Y'mean someb'dy else got away, too?" Jerry asked.

"That's right," the youth answered. "Y'see, it was like this. I was hired t' drive a wagon f'r a girl who was goin' along by 'erself. She was swell. She was just about th' prettiest girl I ever saw."

"Uh-huh," Jerry said.

"I was layin' under th' wagon, wrapped up in my blanket th' night th' Indians jumped us. Y'see, I slept under th' wagon, she slept in th' wagon. Anyway, I was plumb wore out an' hit th' blanket early. She was standin' near th' wagon talkin' with Capt'n Hawks. He was in charge o' th' train. She was askin' th' Capt'n 'bout some feller an' he said he'd seen him once an' that was all. She started off f'r a walk outside th' wagons an' Capt'n Hawks warned 'er about wanderin' off too far. Reckon I musta dozed off b'cause th' next thing I knowed all hell busted loose."

"What b'came o' th' girl?" Marshall asked. "Did you see her again?"

"Not 'till th' next mornin'. . .this mornin'. When I saw how things were goin'. . .there musta been hundreds o' Indians, in fact, I never saw s' many o' th'm in my hull life. . .I figgered th' best thing I could do was t' hightail it away fr'm there pronto. I crept along underneath th' wagons 'til I reached th' last one, spied a horse standin' by all by 'imself an' I jumped out an' made a rush f'r 'im. I run plumb into two Indians."

Pete's eyes were wide with excitement.

"What did y' do?" he asked quickly.

"On'y thing I could do," Ryan answered. "I sailed into 'em. I hit one o' th'm smack in th' belly an' he doubled up and rolled over and over hollerin' f'r all he was worth. Th' other one come at me with his knife. I ducked under his swing and come up with my head right under his jaw. I musta busted it judgin' by th' way he screamed. I turned around t' jump on th' horse but th' danged

critter wasn't there. He just disappeared."

"Holy cow!" Pete whispered in awed tones. "How d'you like that?"

Ryan grinned up at him fleetingly . . .in another instant his face was grim again.

"Another Indian with a club in 'is hand come bustin' past me," he continued. "I stumbled in th' sand an' he hit me a clip. . .wham! He laid me out cold. Reckon it was just about dawn when I come to. It was so quiet with nuthin' stirrin' but th' wind. I twisted around so's I could see if there was any more Indians. They'd gone, awright, but everywhere I looked there was nuthin' but humped-up bodies o' men an' women an' kids. . ."

Pete turned away; Jerry stiffened.

"You said somethin' about seein' th' girl again," Marshall said presently.

"That's right," Ryan said. "Reckon I a'most forgot her. Anyway, while I was layin' there a big, lean feller with a droopy mustache come along and. . ."

"A white man?" Marshall asked.

"Yep. He bent over every one, monkeyed around for a while, then he'd kinda move on t' th' next one. There was a feller layin' 'bout ten feet away fr'm me an' this big galoot went through th' other feller's pockets, then he jerked a ring offa th' dead man's hand."

"I'd sure like t' run into that polecat!" Jerry said through thinned lips. "I'd cut his gizzard out!"

"You an' me both!" Pete added.

"Hope I beat you fellers to it," Ryan said grimly. "I'll never f'rget that feller's face an' some fine day I'll bump into him again. An' when I do. . ."

Jerry nodded understandingly.

"Sure," he said.

"I hate t' keep askin' you, Ryan," Marshall said and stopped.

"YOU mean about th' girl? I'm comin' t' her again now. There was blood runnin' down my face an' into my eyes an' I had t' keep wipin' it out so's I could see what this maverick was doin'. I lost sight uv 'im f'r a spell, but fin'lly he showed up again. He was on his horse an' th' girl, limp as a rag, was in his arms. He rode away tow'rd th' west. That was th' last I saw o' him or her. Pretty soon. . .o-h, mebbe 'n hour later, a mule come sniffn' around. I got a hold o' him an' dragged m'self up an onto 'is back. That's about all I c'n r'member."

"You sure had y'self a time o' things," Pete remarked.

"Yeah, but s'ppose you fellers hadn'ta come along an' found me?" Ryan said.

"What d'you suppose b'come o' th' girl, Marshall?" Jerry asked. "If that polecat rode west, 'bout th' on'y place he coulda took 'er to is Penfield."

Marshall nodded. "I'd a heap sooner see her in Penfield than with th' Indians," he said presently. "What I don't savvy is why th' Indians jumped th' train. Th' Paiutes have been layin' low f'r a long time. Wonder what stirred 'em up again?"

Jerry snorted loudly.

"That's as plain as th' nose on your face, Marshall. Th' Paiutes, leastways accordin' t' what I've heard tell uv 'em, are cuties. Th' chances are they just laid low waitin' f'r somethin' worthwhile t' come along, an' when it did, they were ready f'r it."

"Mebbe."

"No tellin' with Indians," Ryan added. "Long as they're aroun', nob'dy'll ever be safe fr'm 'em. Anyway, just knowin' that Miss Hall ain't in their hands is somethin'. 'Course I dunno how th' Mormons'll treat 'er, but. . ."

"That her name. . .Hall?" Marshall asked.

"Uh-huh. First name's Carol."

Marshall stiffened with startling suddenness.

"Carol Hall?" he echoed. "That what you said, Ryan?"

"Uh-huh. Why?"

Marshall turned on his heel and went out. The three men looked at each other.

"What d'you make o' that?" Pete asked, turning to Jerry.

"Did you see his face?" Ryan asked.

"You stay here with Ryan," Jerry said to Pete. "I'm going after Marshall. I wanna know what's got into him."

He wheeled and raced out. He darted out the front door. . .Marshall was halfway to the corral.

"Marshall!" Jerry yelled. "Wait up!"

The black-clad man gave no indication that he had heard Jerry's hail. He went swiftly to the black, vaulted into the saddle, wheeled the big horse and rode away northward. Jerry, sprinting, came rushing into the corral; he cornered his horse, saddled him, mounted and came whirling out of the enclosure at a full gallop. He swung northward in pursuit of the black.

Marshall, Jerry and Hector McLean raced over the range toward Penfield. Of the three only Jerry made any attempt to talk. Riding between Marshall and McLean he managed to keep up with them although it would have been no effort at all for the black to have left the other two horses far behind. . .as it was, it was a continual struggle between Marshall and the big horse for mastery, a struggle that brought to light the former's skillful horsemanship and his ability to dominate the powerful black.

"What'd Boyle say that polecat's name is?" Jerry panted.

"Jake Hamlin," McLean replied.

Miles flashed away behind them, then suddenly Penfield lay abreast of them, though some three or four miles to the north. Now the black swept ahead. He whirled northward when Marshall gave him a free rein. The others spurred after him at a furious pace. Now Penfield dropped behind, soon, too, it faded out of sight as they thundered away toward the foothills. The three men rode in silence. . .even Jerry, doing his utmost to keep up with them, gave his undivided attention to that particular task. Presently they found themselves riding upgrade. It was shortly after that the foothills loomed up ahead of them.

IT WAS Marshall who suddenly reined in, brought the others to an abrupt halt too. Jerry and McLean followed Marshall's eyes. Half a mile away they could see a cabin, a crude affair even at that distance, nestling at the base of the hills. Without a word they wheeled eastward. . .Marshall swung into the lead. . .spurred their mounts. Glancing at him, Jerry saw Marshall loosen his big Colts in their holsters.

Now they were sweeping down on the cabin. At its door they could see two saddled horses. They were fifty feet from it when Marshall's guns seemed to leap into his hands. The black came thundering up to the door, slid to a stiff-legged stop and Marshall, leaping to the ground, swung around him and went plunging past the two horses idling at the door and into the cabin. Guns in hand, Jerry and McLean came rushing in behind him.

No one spoke. . .there was no need for it; just behind the door lay a huddled figure with a knife jammed deep into its throat, a big, black-bearded man. Beneath an overturned table lay their quarry. Marshall and Jerry dragged the table away, turned Jake over on his back. There was a widening circle of blood beneath him staining the rough unpainted floor. Jake opened his eyes. Marshall shouldered Jerry out of the way. He shoved his hat back from his eyes, bent over Jake.

"You Hamlin?" Marshall demanded.

Jake's eyes fluttered.

"Where's th' girl?" Marshall asked curtly. "Th' one you carried away fr'm th' wagon train?"

Blood dampened Jake's lips.

"At Bishop Gould's place," he whispered.

"That Gould layin' over there b'hind th' door?"

A grin hovered over Jake's mouth.

"Is he dead?"

Marshall nodded.

"What'd you knife 'im for?" he asked.

Jake coughed, turned his head. When he looked up again there was a grimace of pain on his face.

"He got me t' get th' Paiutes t' raid th' wagon train," he whispered. "I know I'm done f'r an' you can't do 'nything t' me now, that's why I'm tellin' you this. Gould wanted th' strong box in th' train. . .ninety thousan' dollars in it. Wanted t' give me ten thousan' f'r my end an' when I stuck up f'r half o' th' hull thing, he pr'tended it was awright with him, then he sneaked up on me, waited 'till I dug up th' box, and jumped me."

McLean bent down beside Marshall.

"He plugged me twice," Jake went on presently, "but I got away fr'm 'im an' managed t' get back in here. When he come bustin' in after me, I let fly with m' knife. It musta caught 'im square 'cause he went down with a crash."

Jake grimaced again, bit his lip to stifle the sob of pain that arose in his throat.

"I ain't never been much good," he went on again shortly, "so me bumpin' off ain't gonna hurt 'nybody. He was bad, plumb bad, all th' way through like a rotten apple."

He closed his eyes gently. McLean touched his arm.

"Hamlin."

Jake's eyes opened slowly. There was a curious glassiness in them.

"Hamlin," McLean said again. "Ever hear uv a convert woman 'mong th' Mormons named McLean? Hester McLean?"

"No."

Marshall and McLean came erect. They looked down at Jake quickly when he stirred. . .as they watched a shudder ran through his body; he stiffened for a moment, then he seemed to break inwardly.

"He's dead," Jerry said simply.

They followed a trail of blood from the cabin to a tiny clearing some thirty or forty feet behind the scene of the killings. They found a shovel . . .actually Jerry found it when he stumbled over it. . .and a few feet beyond it a pit in the ground. Jerry plied the shovel industriously for a few minutes, tossed it aside presently, bent down into the pit and grunted, then he dragged the sought-after strong box to the surface. He broke the lock with a blow from the shovel, threw back the lid.

"There y'are," he said. "Ninety thousan' more or less. It's blood money awright. . .it's got th' blood o' two hundred men, women an' kids on it. Here, one o' you fellers take charge uv it. I don't want 'ny part uv it."

IT WAS Carol who opened the door when Marshall, gun in hand, raced up through the house.

"Ned," she cried.

He caught her in his arms, pressed her to him, sobbing against his chest.

"Oh, Ned!" she whispered. "Ned!"

He patted her back gently, awkwardly.

"It's awright now, honey," he told her reassuringly. "I've got you now an' nothing c'n ever harm you again. Soon's we c'n find somebody t' do th' trick, we'll get married. Feller who figgers on doin' things ought to have 'im a wife. I found that out long ago but I wasn't smart enough t' turn around an' go back for you. Doggoned good thing somebody in this outfit's got good sense. I ain't th' one. Reckon it's you."

There were lines of wagons and groups of unhitched mules and unsaddled horses ranging from the corral right up to the ranch-house door when they returned. Jerry, his eyes wide and a grin on his face, turned to Marshall.

"Sure looks like we got us plenty o' comp'ny again," he said. "Wonder if some more pr'spective mothers are movin' in on us?"

The door opened and four men emerged. Pete Lester came first. . . He turned and grinned and Luke Hanley, Jim and Toby pushed past him.

"Hi, there!" Toby yelled. "Climb down offen that horse so's a feller c'n shake hands with yuh!"

Luke shouldered him aside.

"Make that three fellers, Marshall," he called.

Marshall swung out of the saddle, held up his hands. . .he caught Carol in his arms, turned and put her down on the ground. Luke, Jim and Toby

crowded around him. . .Toby, the smallest, kept hopping around in order to avoid being forgotten and overlooked. Luke looked at Carol . . .he took off his hat.

"I'm Luke Hanley, Ma'm," he said gravely. 'These two g'loots are Jim and Toby. Th' little squirt's Toby. Guess you figgered that out a'ready."

Carol smiled.

"Ned," she said and slid her arm through Marshall's, "Ned has told me all about you. I think you're wonderful, all three of you."

Toby grinned broadly and swept off his hat.

"Ma'm," he said politely, "on b'half o' these two overgrown hombres an' m'self, thank you."

"Awright, Toby," Luke said authoritatively. "You've said your piece an' said it so elegant, beat it b'fore you say 'ny more an' spoil things. "G'wan now. . .Marshall an' me've got things t' talk about."

Marshall turned to Jerry.

"Be a good feller, Jerry, an' take Carol inside so she c'n clean 'erself up," he said.

Jerry grinned broadly.

"You betcha," he replied.

Marshall caught him by the arm.

"R'member," he cautioned him. "Carol's a'ready signed up. She's gonna marry me. You better wait 'till some more widows come along b'fore you go pickin' out number four."

Jerry grinned sheepishly. . .he took Carol by the arm and led her into the house.

"S'ppose I tell you what I know," Luke began, turning to Marshall. "Then you c'n tell me what you've found out. One of Penfield's Elders, a feller named Fisher, slipped outta town an' got t' Salt Lake City. He brung 'em word o' what that Gould was doin' an' what he was up to. I talked with Brigham Young when we got t' Salt Lake an' you c'n take my word f'r it, Marshall, Young, as head o' th' Mormon Church, was fit t' be tied. He's awright, Young is. He don't go f'r any o' Gould's rough stuff."

"That so?" Marshall asked.

"It's a fact," Luke continued. "Young's f'r peace, f'r th' Mormons an' f'r everyb'dy else. Far's he's c'ncerned, it's awright with him f'r Gentiles an' Mormons t' live side by each, long's one don't bother th' other. He knows there are Gentiles aroun' this neck o' th' woods an' he don't see anything t' get het up about either."

"That ain't t' way Gould took it," Jerry remarked.

"You haven't heard 'bout th' Paiutes an' that wagon train, have you?" Marshall asked.

"Your man Lester an' that kid in th' house told me about it," Luke replied. "But don't lose 'ny sleep over th' Paiutes. Th' cavalry's headed f'r this part o' th' country an' d'pend on it, they'll run th' Indians clear out uv it. Now what d'you know?"

"Gould's dead," Marshall said.

"That all?"

"Reckon b'tween that an' what you've told us, things oughta be awright. Oh, yeah. . .got a feller named McLean here. . ."

"MCLEAN?" Luke interrupted. "That's funny. There was a letter at th' trading post at Salt Lake among th' ones nob'dy claimed. They were bein' sent back t' where they come fr'm. Bein' that I'm headin' back home, Ohio, y'know, I offered t' see to it that th' hull batch was r'turned t' th' proper authorities there. Anyway, there's a letter among 'em to a feller named Hector McLean. That your McLean?"

"Yep. He oughta be along d'rectly. Left him in Penfield t' pick up a convert girl an' her mother. They're

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fr'm Ohio an' they've just about d'cided Mormonism is awright f'r Mormons, but not f'r them. Leastways, th' girl d'cided that an' made 'er mother see it that way too. S-ay, Luke. . .that means you've got two more in your party when you start back."

"That's awright. We'll be glad t' have th'm."

"Wa-al?" Pete asked. 'That wind up all th' news you fellers wanted t' swap?"

"Just about," Luke answered. "Understand you're startin' a town here, Marshall. . .Andersonville?"

"That was McLean's idea. I won't be around t' see it take shape, but I'm passin' on title t' this place so's there can't be 'ny squabbles 'bout who owns an' who don't own it."

Luke nodded understandingly.

"S-ay," Pete said suddenly. "Don't anybody feel like eating'? What d'you say we do somethin' about it? Anybody feel th' way I do about it, foller me."

THE east-bound wagon train had gone. Dora and her mother had been made comfortable in the lead wagon. . .Toby had volunteered to see to it that they would be well cared for, and of course, well protected.

"Luke an' Jim c'n laugh all they like," Toby had confided to Marshall. "But she's a swell lookin' girl an' while I ain't no beauty, I got prospects. I got me an' uncle back in Missouri who ain't gonna live f'r-ever. I'm his on'y livin' next o' kin an' he's got a-plenty. Gee, it'd sure be funny of Dora kinda took a likin' t' me, wouldn't it?"

Hector McLean too had gone.

"Hate t' run off like this," he had said. "Just when things are b'ginnin' t' run smooth, but I got two kids waitin' f'r me back home."

"That letter Luke had. . . ."

'It was fr'm my mother. They found Hester. She's dead. Reckon that hunt's over. Now I'll go back home an' take care o' my kids."

Jerry and Pete and young Ryan, the latter sufficiently recovered from his injuries to get about, came to Marshall the moment they heard that he was heading for California.

"'Course I know that on a honeymoon two's comp'ny an' five's a hull army," Jerry said. "But doggone it, Marshall, Pete an' me work f'r you an' when you move along, we do too. Mebbe th' law don't say so, but doggone it, law or no law, we're goin' with yuh."

Young Ryan, waiting for Jerry to finish, pushed his way forward now.

"I ain't got 'ny claims on you a-tall," he said with a grin. "But, heck, I'm another man an' there's plenty o' bad country b'tween here an' California. An' a good man, someb'dy who c'n sling a rifle, is mighty handy when th' goin' gets tough. What d'you say. . .c'n I trail along too?"

Marshall laughed.

"Sure. An' I'm doggoned glad t' have you. 'Course that goes f'r you, Jerry, an' for you too, Pete. Hey. . . here comes Carol. S'ppose you fellers hightail it? Give a feller a break."

The three trudged away. However they halted presently behind a tree and peered out.

"Oh, brother!" Pete signed. "That love bus'ness sure does things t' me!"

"Oh, I dunno," Jerry said airily. "'Course Hanley on'y married them last night so th' gilt ain't worn off yet. But shucks, mebbe after a while they'll f'rget that huggin' an' kissin' an'. . . ."

Pete turned on him.

"Why, you lop eared ol' coot," he sputtered. 'That love o' theirs is beautiful. You got y' self tied up t' three ol' widders who didn't have 'ny more get to 'em than that ol' bunkhouse. G'wan, you can't kid me. If a good lookin' woman, free an' un'ttached was t' come along right now an' give you th' eye, heck you'd break your danged neck catchin' up with 'er. Come on, Jerry. . .you, too, Ryan. Leave them alone. They're swell folks an' havin' them married to each other makes everything just right. Come on."

THE END

BULLFIDDLE AND THE BAD MAN

By Byron W. Dalrymple

(Author of "Revenge of the Thunder Gods")

Bullfiddle never seemed to learn that he had a Music-Jinx, and when he whistled: "Trouble, Stay Away From Me," Trouble reared up and descended on him like a wild stallion's flashing hooves!

HAPPINESS, opined Bullfiddle Bogue sadly, was a fleeting, unpredictable thing. A few moments ago he had clutched it to his bosom. Exactly one moment later he had found himself staring into the bald, blue maw of a horse pistol.

Now he lay in a buckboard driven by the owner of the pistol. Its destination was unknown to Bullfiddle; it careened wildly across the blistering desert, and with every jounce Bullfiddle's head banged the bottom. He immediately sensed the ominous import of this predicament: one of his periodic intervals of travail had begun.

To these exasperating interludes, Bullfiddle had become resigned. He was more than unlucky. Bullfiddle Bogue, itinerant cowhand-musician, was absolutely convinced that he owned a long-term lease on a very special kind of hex, a music-jinx.

He decided to roll a smoke, but attempted movement brought sharply to mind an irritating fact: he was snugly trussed, hand and foot, with the stout strings of Sidekick, his big and battered old bass viol.

He thought: "If only I could remember not to whistle at *all!*"

Bullfiddle's memory in that respect was not one hundredth-fraction as long as his skinny six-foot-four frame. He was forever whistling, and sooner or later he always drifted into that sad, sweet melody, "Trouble, Why Pick On Me."

It was the first of his original compositions, written ten trouble-harried years ago. Always, when he whistled it, he immediately became the recipient of unlimited woe. This was more than coincidence, surely; that tune was a sure-enough jinx!

Even the most confirmed skeptic would be shaken, Bullfiddle was certain, by reviewing the chain of events leading to his present predicament. This particular joust with the music-jinx had begun just two hours ago, at high noon.

It was then that he tramped out of cool, shady Bearpaw Canyon, happily, though unconsciously, whistling "Trouble, Why Pick On Me."

That sound ceased abruptly. He stared ahead. His outsize Adam's apple shuttled shakily over its six-inch track. His wistful, pale blue eyes were wide with anticipated agony.

"There," he groaned, "I've done it again. And now, just *look* at that desert facin' me!"

He eased Sidekick to the ground. Beneath that ungainly burden he had labored for forty miles during the past two days, heading cross-country to Riverview, on the Rio Grande, to take a whack at the "big time." Ten bucks a week and found, at the Valley Lass Saloon in Riverview, was an amazing improvement over the chili-and-tips arrangement he had left behind at the Renegade Bar in Socorro.

He squinted off into the sandy cauldron. "I simply *got* to git to Riverview." His long, bony face was immeasurably alarmed. "Tomorrow's the deadline. My career is at stake!"

He heaved Sidekick to his aching shoulders and set off, his every step eliciting a groan. Bullfiddle's extremely small feet were, next to Sidekick, his greatest pride, but pride had been his undoing. Fancy-tooled, high-heeled, pink leather boots were not quite practical for long-distance mountain and desert walking. He recalled the scrawny claybank mare he had been forced to barter for a new set of fiddle strings. If only that mare's feet could change places with his this instant!

PRESENTLY, ahead, he spied a single scraggly mesquite. It made a daub of dubious shade upon the scorching sand. Bullfiddle's spirits rose. He pursed parched lips and began to whistle.

This sound ceased in mid-phrase and was replaced by a wail of utter despair: "What now!" He had again forgot himself. He had started to whistle "Trouble, Why Pick On Me."

He paused to shift the position of Sidekick, and in so doing, he turned —and there, behind him, billowed a cloud of dust from which a buckboard took shape.

Bullfiddle's ample mouth fell open. Disregarding his blistered feet, he raced to the mesquite, leaned Sidekick against it, and performed a hilarious jig in the sand.

"Yippee!" he shouted. "I've broke the jinx! I whistled her twice—and up jumps a ride!"

This situation, after ten years, was a tremendous shock. Bullfiddle was weak; his knees shook. He immediately assumed his favorite—that is, horizontal—position beneath the mesquite, and closed his eyes. Oh, happy day!

Presently the team and buckboard plunged to a dust-blasting halt beside the mesquite. Bullfiddle's pale blue eyes opened slowly. Then he leaped up with a yelp.

NO friendly rancher appraised him. Instead, he gazed into the leering blue maw of a cocked forty-four. Above it, a swarthy, bearded face framed two black eyes which made known their desire: would Bullfiddle kindly claw the clouds—or would he prefer to have that "hawg-leg" play "I'm a Dead Cowboy" on his brisket?

Bullfiddle's lank dimensions stretched out. His large hands, held high, looked like the spatulate sections of a beavertail-cactus. His sandy hair seemed to be holding his white, high-crowned sombrero in midair. His wide blue gaze had little time for the frightened young thing who cowered behind this badman. He noted only that she was blonde and beautiful, blue-eyed and frail, and that her hands and feet were securely tied.

"So Clem Clayborn hired you to try an' stop me!" the big-paunched badman scoffed.

"Wh-who's Clem Clayborn?" Bullfiddle stuttered.

"You know who he is—he's Elly's financy, cuss him!"

The girl cried, "Windy Gates, you fool! I never saw this gentleman before in my life! Please—let me go—"

Windy the Badman's face softened. His voice tried to be kind, like thunder: "Elly Purdy, you ain't lyin' to me, are you?"

She shook her head and burst into tears.

Windy the Badman looked dolefully at Bullfiddle. "Elly's a little upset, pore thing. Wimmin git thataway when they're in love, I reckon."

"Love!" Elly blazed tearfully. "I hate you, you big windbag!"

"Naow, Elly. You an' me'll own the hull of Weepin' Woman valley." Windy the Badman got down and frisked Bullfiddle. "We'll run that jack-pap tinhorn of a Clayborn off'n his own range, cuss him. He won't bother you no more."

"But I love him!" Elly wailed. "It's not that we want to monopolize the valley and crowd you out."

Windy the Badman snorted. "Such big words. If you loved him, you wouldn't of run off with me thisaway."

Bullfiddle's heart was touched by the sounds of grief Elly now produced. Love was close kin to his artistic temperament. He was easily

touched by the spectacle of a grieving woman, especially a pretty one. In his head the germ of a sad and tender love song began to take root.

For an instant he forgot the cocked forty-four. He pictured himself, seated beside frail and beautiful Elly, riding away into the sunset—after he had disposed of Windy the Badman with his bare hands.

A prod of the forty-four brought him to his senses. 'Git yore contraption, you long-geared nightingale. I'm aimin' to have mewsic fer my weddin'. You like mewsic, don't you, Elly?"

Elly nodded in tearful resignation. Bullfiddle picked up Sidekick. His love germ sprouted. Perhaps he and Sidekick could make Elly forget Clem Clayborn. He stared at her tear-stained face, trying to impart his sympathy.

"Quit gawkin'," Windy the Badman bellowed, "an' drape yore frame in the wagon!"

Bullfiddle tangled his feet, trying to obey. The coil of new fiddle strings, which had cost him his mare, fell out of his shirt.

Windy the Badman scooped them up in a hairy paw. "Ha! So that's it! Clayborn sent you out here to jump me an' garrit me with these here—an' you went to sleep on the job, cuss you!"

He booted Bullfiddle into the buckboard, and began to truss him. When he saw Bullfiddle's tiny feet, and the pink-leather boots, he slapped his thigh and let out a howl of raucous laughter. Bullfiddle's new-found love was crushed out of him by Windy the Badman's knee upon his chest.

NOW, as he bounced in the buckboard, Bullfiddle fathomed the mystery of this triangle. Apparently Clayborn and Windy and Elly were all ranch owners. The two men had vied for Elly's hand, Clayborn urged by love, Windy the Badman by greed to control Weeping Woman valley. Clayborn had won—and lost. Windy the Badman was a man of action.

That character struggled with his team, and glanced back at Bullfiddle from time to time, as though pondering something important. He mumbled: "Have to figure out what to do with you, durin' the next few days."

Few *days!* Bullfiddle squirmed. Tomorrow was the deadline for his appearance at the Valley Lass. To make matters worse, the buckboard was turning north. Riverview was southwest. Bullfiddle groaned; his career was shattered. He might even have to take a job as a cowpuncher, hardly a fit occupation for an artist of his caliber. Why had he ever written "Trouble, Why Pick On Me?"!

Windy the Badman urged his horses. "You'll like the place I'm takin' you, Elly. It's in the mountains. It's got a nice crick, an' a grove. It's a log cabin with barred winders, so's nobody kin bother us. Used to belong to a friend of mine. He fit sin wharever he found it, an' when the Sheriff's posse got too close, he holed up in this here cabin. Rampart—"

Elly screamed. "Not Rampart Blue!" Her face was ghastly with fright.

Windy the Badman nodded. "Shore. Rampart's goin' to be there to marry us."

Elly sobbed bitterly. Bullfiddle's heart thumped his ribs. Everyone in New Mexico had heard of Rampart Blue, two-gun marryin' man who took his name (so *he* claimed) from battering the ramparts of sin wherever they barred him, and his fame from his expert use of his guns in fighting evil.

"Rampart's goin' back to Weepin' Woman with us, after the honeymoon," Windy the Badman explained. "—he figures Clem Clayborn's an evil man, an' just might need a lesson in six-gun religion." He looked round at Bullfiddle and guffawed at his own joke.

As they wound into the mountains, Windy the Badman said, "Yep, a perfect settin' fer love."

But as dusk touched the mountains and the buckboard came to a halt be-

fore the log cabin, Bullfiddle surveyed the place with anything but thoughts of love.

"Rampart," the Badman roared. "Come out here!"

There was no answer from the dark cabin. "Huh," Windy said, "maybe Rampart's been fightin' the saloon devil agin', tryin' to rid the country of whiskey." He laughed and nudged Elly. Then he clambered down and went to the cabin.

"Oh, Elly," Bullfiddle said softly. "I wisht there was someway me and Sidekick could help you—only there ain't no use tryin', as long as the jinx—"

"I know you'd be brave," she interrupted. Her voice was like music. "If you had a chance—Mister—"

"Bogue. Bullfiddle Bogue."

"— Bullfiddle," she finished with a sweet intimacy that made resolve flare within Bullfiddle's boney bosom.

"We could ride away into the sunset," Bullfiddle whispered.

"Into the sunset," Elly said, and she began to sob.

Ah, sweet moment! Bullfiddle forgot his predicament. Had Elly, too, been touched by love for him and Sidekick? He pursed his lips and began to whistle a sad, sweet song. His whistling stopped in the very middle of a note. Breath went out of him. He groaned. He had done it again!

Windy the Badman came out of the cabin. He lifted Elly, carried her to the cabin, unbound her, and locked her in. He then returned and lowered Sidekick to the ground.

He stood back and surveyed the big fiddle. He approached and thumped the cracked sounding board with his fist. A wide grin spread into his beard.

"I allus wanted one of them contraptions," he said. "Now I got one. I'll serenade Elly every night. Soon as the weddin's over, so's I don't need you no longer for a witness, it'll be mine—" He shoved his face down until his beard brushed Bullfiddle's face. "—cause then I'm goin' to kill you!"

STILL bound, Bullfiddle lay beside a rippling stream which angled through a grove of stout aspen saplings. Here Windy the Badman had lugged him. Up the pathway, he could see an oil lamp flickering inside the cabin. As yet Rampart Blue had not arrived.

To think, Bullfiddle thought sadly, that the ascending star of his career should explode here on this mountain top. Trouble, he thought, why pick on me? And he groaned aloud. That vile song was always in his mind. The music-jinx could not even let him die in peace.

Presently the gurgling stream lulled him. He dozed; he dreamed. He was back in Texas, on his old father's ranch. He was a kid again, out setting jackrabbit snares. He took a rabbit from a snare. But it wasn't dead. It jumped up, stood on its hindlegs, and began to box him with its front feet.

The rabbit hit him in a hundred places at once. But the blows didn't hurt. They were soft and soothing—and wet.

Bullfiddle awoke with a start. It was raining. He groaned, tried to move those parts of him which had been his small, pink-booted feet. They now semed like lumps of earth. The rain pelted down harder and harder.

Suddenly a wonderful realization came over Bullfiddle. He lay back and relaxed and let his spirits rise gradually. Did he dare to hope—

He wriggled his feet. Something gave a little. The rain—it was making the fiddle strings stretch. Was this ever a time to be thankful for extremely small feet!

"Come on, little feet," Bullfiddle coaxed proudly. "Turn yourselves loose." Quick as a coyote, they were free.

Bullfiddle heard the cabin door open. "Rampart, cuss you!" Windy the Badman was getting anxious. Elly's wail sliced the night. "Naow, Elly, don't you fret. Rampart'll git here 'fore mornin'."

Yes, Bullfiddle thought happily, don't you fret, beautiful Elly. Before

morning Bullfiddle will git there, too!

Somehow, he must rescue Elly, and then— He hardly dared imagine— He almost started to whistle that pesky tune again. For once, he remembered. Now, he thought, we're gitin' somewhere!

He arose unsteadily. He stamped his small feet. He grinned down in full pride upon those pink-booted members. On one of the stout aspen saplings which framed the narrow, moonlit pathway, he found a sharp, dead stub. He raised his beavertail-cactus hands, picked at the fiddle-string knot. It gave.

"I'm comin', sweet Elly," he crooned. "Bullfiddle Bogue is on the way!"

There was the sound of hoofbeats. The cabin door flew wide, framing Windy the Badman in yellow lamplight. Bullfiddle froze. A horse burst out of the night, and snorted to a stop. A tall, lank individual stepped down. He was splashed with weak yellow light from the doorway.

Windy the Badman boomed: "Rampart Blue, you sin-killin' ole marryin' mishinary!"

BULLFIDDLE trembled at what he saw. Rampart Blue was built like a lanky Texas Longhorn. He threw off his slicker. He was dressed in black, even to his tall boots and his wide flat-crown. His starched white shirt glistened. A gust tossed his black string tie. He spread his boots and posed with palms flat down upon the butts of two pearl-handled six-guns, tied low on his thighs.

"Peace, brother Windy," he rasped. "Rampart Blue has arrived."

His narrow, hawk-eyed face broke into a slow grin. Suddenly his laughter boomed upon the still night. Windy the Badman joined. They entered the cabin, pumping hands, leaving the door wide open.

Bullfiddle began to consider the better part of valor. The starch of his resolve turned to putty. Yet, even to escape, he must travel the path past the cabin. Rampart's horse might snort and give him away. The thought of coming in range of Rampart Blue's sin-slamming six-guns was most distasteful to Bullfiddle.

He picked up the rainsoaked fiddle strings. He must forget and forego love. Somehow, he must retrieve Sidekick and fade into the night. Perhaps there was yet time to save his career at the Valley Lass.

But love and compassion smote him suddenly and solidly in the form of Elly's doleful wail. Dilemma held him. Sadly, he recalled his dream of his old Texas home. He coiled the fiddle strings in trembling hands. He pictured himself, lying dead, here in these mountains.

His knees shook. He steadied himself against a sapling. It gave. Nervously, he stepped away. The sapling snapped back, batted him roughly. Suddenly Bullfiddle began to grin.

"Jackrabbits," he whispered.

The greatest thought of his stormy career was taking shape in his mind. What a plan!

He stared at the new fiddle strings. He thought of the claybank mare they had cost him. He thought of the Valley Lass. He pictured sweet Elly.

Decision was his. A mare, a set of fiddle strings, a whack at the "big time"—all that was small price, indeed, to pay for sweet Elly and love. He set to work with quiet haste.

Presently, from the cabin, he heard the rasping voice of Rampart Blue: "Do you, Windy Gates, take this woman—"

"Hold on, Rampart. I gotta go git

BUY MORE BONDS AND STAMPS

my witness. Whar's my gun?"

Time was fleeting. "Hold off, jinx," Bullfiddle breathed.

"Whar's my slicker?"

Bullfiddle's trembling hands finished the invention his mind had conceived. The test of a lifetime was at hand. He seized a rock, heaved it at the cabin. It whacked solidly. Bullfiddle yelled: "Come out an' fight, you two-gun sin-slammer!"

Awesome silence. Then Windy the Badman roared, "That fiddlin' fool's got loose. Come on, Rampart!"

There was a rush of boots. Black figures blotted the lamplighted doorway. Bullfiddle, yelling like an Indian, wheeled and stretched his long legs down the moonlit pathway.

Shots ripped the night, whizzed through Bullfiddle's sombrero. "Come on little feet," he invoked. The rippling stream rushed before him. Into it he plunged blindly.

Behind him there was a yelp, the rip and swish of aspen branches. "Help!" Rampart shouted.

The moonlight outlined his black figure. He was standing on his head in the pathway, his legs forming a wide and perfect V — only he was really not standing on his head. His head was a yard above the ground. His guns bounced away into the underbrush. He was swinging in midair.

"Rampart—what the—" Windy the Badman rushed toward him. "Yipe!" he squawked suddenly. His legs shot from under him, ripped out into another wide V. His gun skittered away. Quick as a flash, he, too, was standing on his head in midair. Bedlam filled the night.

"Elly!" Bullfiddle shouted. "The buckboard—quick!"

DAWN, Bullfiddle opined, was not as well suited to love as was sunset. But it would have to do. The rough comfort of the buckboard seat was beneath him, old Sidekick was jouncing in the box—and sweet Elly was beside him, her tears dried at last.

"Oh, sweet Elly," he said. "It's wonderful."

"I was dreamin' of snarin' jackrabbits, down home," he said, grinning modestly, "an' I figured out how to make me a Rampart Blue snare and a Windy the Badman snare. Old Sidekick's new strings was mighty strong. So was them aspens."

He chuckled happily. He placed his arm around Elly. "We'll be married in Riverview." He began to whistle.

Gently she pushed his arm away. "You are a fine, brave character, Bullfiddle," she said tenderly. She wiped a tear from her eye. "But—"

Bullfiddle's whistling ceased. He stopped the team. His head sank down into his beavertail-cactus hands. He groaned. Something terrible, he knew, was coming. He had been whistling "Trouble, Why Pick On Me!"

"It's Clem Clayborn," she said. "We've been secretly married for months. I didn't dare tell Windy. He'd have killed Clem. Oh, Mister Bogue, I'm so sorry—"

Slowly, sadly, Bullfiddle got down from the buckboard. He lifted Sidekick onto his shoulders and set his face in the direction of Riverview. "Me an' Sidekick has got a career waitin' at the Valley Lass in Riverview," he said in a choked voice. "We gotta hurry. You'll git home all right now."

He set his small, pink boots upon the trail, and he did not look back. He could still make it, with luck. After a time he began recalling other instances when he had been touched by love. "Women," he opined, "just ain't for Bullfiddle Bogue, I reckon."

He began to wonder whatever would become of Windy the Badman and Rampart Blue, leg-spread and dangling from cross-path saplings, back there in the mountains. He began to laugh till he had to set Sidetrack down and hold his sides. For out of his wondering had come a *wonderful* idea for a new song; and if anything could make Bullfiddle forget sadness, it was a new composition.

The song, Bullfiddle decided, would be titled, "'Tain't None of My Business."

THE END

Jerry was plenty mad over the way his plans misfired.

THE TENDERFOOT CAME A'COURTIN'

By Ralph Berard

(author of "Too Many Sheriffs," "Hell on the Home Range," etc.)

It was downright brutal, the trick Mike and Jerry whipped up to play on this pilgrim from New York when the Tenderfoot went a'courtin' Miss Todd, the pretty school teacher.

THE horse with the broom-handle tail was tied between the boss's tan gelding and Jerry Brisco's roan in front of the Range-finder's saloon. Mike Gladstone leaned against the rail two hundred yards south because he still wasn't on speaking terms with Brisco due to the fight-to-the-death struggle between them over their courting of the purty and pink-cheeked school marm, Loretta.

The sky was dirty grey with a soft drizzle leaking out like warm molasses. Cattle Center's main street was coated with six inches of quagmire developed by this same March rain, trying to wheedle a hard winter's frost all out of mother earth in one warm gulp. Sloppy describes the condition.

The whole B Bar B crew was lined along the boardwalk between Jerry and Mike waiting for fun which they expected to let loose unrestrained as soon as the Saint Jo stage pulled in. Old man Jacobs had hired a complete and absolute tenderfoot from Noo York City who was due on said vehicle and the horse with the broom-

handle tail was not a horse at all.

The winter had been long and hard. Times for the B Bar B boys had been dull and monotonous; now the sudden warm weather had sprouted an outburst of relief and early spring hell in them more virile than grass seeds in a manure pile.

They had tied a horse's tail to a dry milk cow, painted the beast black with white spots, saddled it, tied down its ears and slipped a dead jackass's ears over its horns. It was the damndest looking thing you ever saw.

This cow, named Bossy, being a gentle creature, put up with it all in reasonably good humor. They tied her close between the boss's gelding and Jerry's roan, hoping to get Sid Timpkin's tender frame aboard before the tenderfoot scented the foul breeze wafted from the direction of his supposedly friendly welcoming committee. Bossy's instinctive objections to being ridden and the deep Cattle Centre ooze were depended upon to complete the entertainment.

Jacobs called up the line, "Hey, Mike, wouldn't this be a good time for you to come down here and get on speakin' terms again with Jerry, b'fore this city dude makes up t' Miss Todd an' cuts out both you steer-ropin' jaspers?"

Mike edged closer, not courting peace with Jerry, but because he was a tall, slender and powerfully bashful hombre who couldn't endure having the boss air his affairs of heart in public. Jerry, a little stubby half pint puncher, who was always willing to go half way, grinned and spoke to nobody and to everybody. "Reckon neither of us ain't making no particularly favorable impression on anybody by not talkin'." Which was right sensible.

Somebody yelled, "T h a r she comes."

She was most of three hours late, but she sure enough was coming. There was no dust cloud like in summer time and no drum-drum-drum of hoofs like in frozen winter. But she'd sneaked up close enough for the pluph-pluph-pluph of the horses' hoofs to be heard. She pulled up and stopped. Four waddies, Rufe Callister who owned the town bank, and the cattle buyer from Jinks City climbed out. There was a pause in unloading. Then the scuffed end of a black suitcase protruded and the B Bar B boys saw the lily-white and delicate hand hanging onto the handle, the high-crowned soft hat that ducked low, and the awkward, crouched figure of a medium-built stranger who didn't even know how to alight from a stage coach.

THE boss took Sid Timpkin's suitcase, Jerry and Mike drew close together with only the tenderfoot between them and with one ahold of each arm. They marched him toward the decorated cow while the other B Bar B boys raised merry hell with sixshooters.

One look at Timpkin's face would satisfy anybody he was in no humor to tell horse from decorated cow. Timpkins was a good-looking fellow about the face and his putting together was not so bad. But his acclimation to points west of the Hudsn River had been much neglected. Finding himself astride Bossy with reins in hand, none of which he had asked for nor expected, with the din of sixshooters aggravating the silence and half a hundred much amused on-lookers looking on, he retained not even the presence of mind to try to hang on.

"This'll be your own private nag from now on," Mike Gladstone imparted as he made a back flip of his heel and flanked Bossy with his spur, "all you got to do is hang on tight and feed her well."

Old Man Jacobs got onto his horse. Jerry climbed onto his roan. Their intention was to flank Sid Timpkins' outlandish steed from either side and prevent serious bloodshed. But Bossy cow had strange and different ideas. Too much gunfire and the sudden extra weight on her hollow sway back excited her with much suddenness. She leaped forward in four great gallops, then stopped in one short period of unbelievable abruptness.

Sid Timpkins parachuted upward

and forward. He sailed gracefully between Bossy's dead donkey ears. Hands, feet, face and stomach were equi-distant above the quagmired street. All landed in one enormous plopff. A raucous peal of laughter rumbled up and down the boardwalk, dimmed and then gradually faded into a very uncomfortable silence.

Sid Timpkins did not rise. His nose and eyes and mouth lay completely submerged in the oozy brown filth of what was no one-horse town.

The old man chawed his tobacco vigorously and spat. In the excitement Jerry Brisco even spoke to his hated rival, "Suppose he's really hurt, Mike?"

While they hesitated about doing something a shrill feminine voice rose with considerable wrath. "You brutes! You mean things!"

Loretta Todd opened a way directly between Jerry and Mike. Lifting her full-fitting satin dress to recklessly show both the second and third ruffle of a spotlessly white petticoat she disregarded her dainty high-heel shoes entirely and splashed to the fallen tenderfoot's muddy side.

Jerry glared at Mike. Mike said, "Well, dammit; was it my fault?" Because the petite school marm kneeled right there in the street, raised that Noo York dude's handsome head onto her lap and began wiping his face with a fine, clean hanky.

Timpkins opened his eyes, then closed one again while the other seemed to take in a very great deal of Loretta Todd's charm and beauty. And the fellow was no fool for he straightway closed both eyes again and began to sputter and moan as if he'd been broke right through in the middle.

The B Bar B boss began to grin when he saw nobody was killed. He spat a longer string of tobacco juice than he usually did. He turned to Jerry and Mike, each in turn, and said with the triumphant note of a Roman soothsayer, "I warned you boys regardin' this city slicker, didn't I? Supposin' you two trot out there in the mud and help Miss Todd bring that poor fellow in to a safe landing here at the sidewalk."

The boys didn't have a will for it, but they didn't have a will for crossing the boss either. They both had on fancy city get-up, both half suspecting Loretta would be in town like she was, and even their boots was black and polished like was nobody's business to step off a horse with.

A LITTLE laughing had begun again, led mostly by the boss. Somebody shouted, "That's right, boys; go along an' give yer buddy a lift."

They scowled around at this tormentor so dangerously that most everybody was momentarily silenced. Then they strode forward.

The soup sloshed up around them. And in spite of being careful, each step of one caused a splash of mud on the other. This caused them to look at each other and sort of recognize one another which reminded them they weren't friends, and then they scowled and moved further apart, finally converging on Sid Timpkins from different sides.

Timpkins' head was reposing at the time comfortably in Loretta's lap. He had found by now that only occasional sighs of pain were sufficient to keep her soft hand stroking the black hair back from his forehead. He must have looked upon Jerry and Mike's offer of help in the light of an intrusion, or else that Noo Yorker was powerful smart, for he reached up a hand to them each, then let himself slip back and grabbed at their pants legs as he slid down. That one slide muddied them considerable.

It became plain Timpkins was no man to hold a grudge. "Nice batch of fun you boys had," he groaned. "I know I'm pretty green and I don't blame you a bit." He had got on his knees. They helped him to his feet. Then he seemed to get tangled in the cuff of his own pants leg or something and his hands pawed the air something frantic. One specially muddied paw got hold of Jerry's nose and the other flatted against Mike's cheek in an attempt to keep from

How to prevent inflation in one easy lesson

Put that money back in your pocket!

When a lot of people want the same thing, its price goes up.

Americans have more money today—much more—than there are things to buy with it.

So every big or little thing you buy—that you can possibly do without—cuts supplies and bids prices up on what is left.

Rising prices spell inflation. And every inflation has been followed by a cruel and bitter depression . . . men out of work, homes lost, families suffering.

We don't want inflation: we don't want another depression.

4 THINGS TO DO to keep prices down and help avoid another depression

1. *Don't* buy a thing you can do without.
2. *Never* pay more than the ceiling price. Always give stamps for rationed goods.
3. *Don't* take advantage of war conditions to fight for more money for yourself or goods you sell.
4. *Save* Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can afford—to help pay for the war and insure your future. Keep up your insurance.

HELP US KEEP PRICES DOWN

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falling. Then he fell anyway, landing against Mike who promptly lost control of his top piece and gave poor Timpkins an impolite shove. Timpkins took advantage of the favor to land against Jerry with so much force as to upset them both. At the same time he grabbed back and caught Mike's sleeve pulling him along into the general mess.

And, so help us, the tenderfoot got up before either of the others could. He daintily placed one forefinger under Loretta's elbow and, not forgetting to continue his groaning, he walked her to the sidewalk, all the time holding his free arm in a bent and much pained position.

"Is there a doctor?" he moaned on reaching the boardwalk. "A doctor any place? My arm is broken."

Everybody stopped laughing again which was quite considerable effort. Timpkins took up his moaning where Jerry and Mike had interrupted and, as those two bedraggled citizens approached, he screeched at them in a shrill, angry voice, "Were you two trying to kill me?" Then immediately, he turned to the girl and looked at her with the pleading eyes of a calf whose mother has just been shipped to market. "Please, Miss. . .Miss?"

"Miss Todd," Loretta helped and smiled understandingly.

Timpkins returned her a faint smile through his synthetic look of pain. "Please, Miss, I'm sorry to bother you so much. . .but, could you, is there a place we could go. . . could you take me some place where this arm could be bathed. . . and maybe bandaged?"

"Doc Reynolds' office is just a block," Loretta agreed sympathetically. "I'll help you there."

Even the boss's eyes opened at that. They started to move off with Timpkins still balancing Loretta's elbow with the finger of his good arm. Jacobs got to chuckling. "Looks like I hired me a right smart cowhand, even smarter'n I calculated."

Jerry smouldered. "His arm ain't no more broke than mine is."

Right then Sid Timpkins looked back over his shoulder and called out, "Oh, boys, would you be kind enough to look after my suitcase?"

Whereupon Jerry and Mike turned toward each other with gradually softening countenances. By mutual impulse each extended a hand and by the same impulse, each took one. "We got to do something about that guy." The words were said in chorus by two determined and exceedingly muddy cowhands.

BEFORE Christmas, Julius Clark had put a big new glass window in his general store. First he filled it with toys and dolls, and got all the youngsters so excited over things they'd never seen before, that most everybody was mad at Julius because of having to spend so much money at his place. Then he shocked all the God-loving church people by filling that window with women's underclothes right out where anybody could look.

One Saturday, when Jerry and Mike rode to town, they found Loretta standing in front of Julius's window. Coming up on her unexpected-like, they caught her daubing her eyes with a hanky, and looking into that window, they observed the most fanatical headgear for women they'd ever seen. There was headpieces with stuffed birds sitting on them. One even had some imitation tree limbs with two yellow canaries.

Right in the middle, though, sitting high and sort of lording it over the smaller hats, was a big black one which spread out a couple of feet in each direction and had a wavy shape as if it didn't have the backbone to stand straight. Two big white plumes stuck straight up in front and there was a note on a little card explaining how these funny, fuzzy things was plucked off some big bird in Africa and the Nob Hill San Franciscans were having social insanity over them.

Jerry and Mike were working together again as a matter of necessity against the common enemy. "Y-you seem grieved over something, Miss Todd," Jerry stammered as he stopped beside Loretta.

Loretta smiled bravely, though

there was still moisture in her eyes. "That hat. . . Oh, that hat. How I would love to have it." Then she seemed to become a little angry. "I think it's downright cruel for Mister Clark to display a thing like that. Nobody in the valley could afford to buy it."

The price wasn't on the hat. To Jerry's mind it wasn't worth fifty cents. Mike considered it an absurdity. Why it should bring tears to Loretta's eyes were completely beyond them. Loretta, still daubing and smiling, too, said, "If I could only wear a gorgeous thing like that to church on Easter Sabbath."

This remark offered the boys the opening they had sought. "Now Easter Sunday, Ma'am," Mike managed, "is a subject of which we have been thinking. It would give us both a tremendous pleasure. . ."

Well, the boys made the date all right. They got back to the B Bar B full of a new chest-puffing importance. Sid Timpkins, who had become quite a cowhand by this time, sensed something was going wrong with his courting of the school marm, and that evening he set off for town.

It wasn't any coincidence, of course, that Timpkins should learn about the hat. Anybody could find Loretta most any time outside of school hours just standing in front of Julius's window mooning over that hat. Timpkins found her there, it seems, and at first, made the same error Jerry and Mike had committed. Instead of realizing the inherent drawing powers of the mighty ostrich feathers, he went to work crudely on the subject of, "May I not escort you to church?"

Loretta smiled. She was sorry. The B Bar B boys had asked her first.

Whereupon Timpkins observed the hat. To him, as to Jerry and Mike, the thing was a monstrosity. But Timpkins had a soul for love and womanly understanding. Still more important, Timpkins had some money and on the following Monday, he bought the hat.

Mike and Jerry were sitting on the big B Bar B porch Monday evening when Timpkins slid carefully from his pinto pony. He still could ride none too well and the enormous hat box was certainly nothing a man could conceal beneath his vest. "My Gawd," Mike divined confidentially to Jerry, "he's bought her that hat."

JERRY had trouble getting his mouth closed and didn't answer. Timpkins tossed his bridlestrap over the hitch post and came on up the steps, nodding to the boys a little loftily. It didn't occur to him that the boys knew Loretta's connection with the hat. Both Mike and Jerry, however, immediately realized the disadvantage they were at and began plotting vengeance by way of pole cats and stampedes.

The coming Sunday would be the fatal Easter. Mike and Jerry went into a huddle on the porch. When Timpkins reappeared from the bunkhouse Mike began, "You ain't been here long enough yet, I reckon, to see any real stampedes, have you, Timpkins? Now there is something right genuinely dangerous. 'Woe to the rider and woe to the steed'," he quoted dramatically, 'who falls in front of that mad stampede.'"

"Are we about to have one?" Timpkins inquired cocking one eye with some suspicion.

"Naw, I don't know that we are," Mike continued distributing tobacco juice just beyond the lower porch step. "But such things can happen around a big spread like this most any unexpected moment."

Jerry had got up unnoticed, and by circling the ranch-house, he reached the bunkhouse unobserved. Piled at the head of Timpkin's bunk was the big pasteboard box. Jerry made proper mental notes and, returning to Mike, he added what color he could to the danger and excitement of local stampeding.

Friday was the night Timpkins usually called upon the school marm. That would be the time, the B Bar B boys reasoned, when the tenderfoot would deliver the famous hat. It was just after dinner when they slipped to the bunkhouse and, with heartbreakingly slow carefulness untied the be-ribboned box and substi-

tuted two polecat skins for the gorgeous headgear. Realizing the difference in weight, the boys had removed the cats from inside the skins and had sprinkled on a trifle of salt and alum but they were careful not to supply enough curative to greatly diminish the smelly, greasy character of the unpleasant articles. With great glee they read the fine card Timpkins was sending with the hat:

This is your Easter bonnet
With black and white plumes upon it.

Whereupon the boys stood the polecat's tails up straighter and attached the card as it had been at the base of the ostrich plumes. They then re-tied the ribbons and made off with the hat.

Finding a black satin dress presented something of a problem. But by Sunday morning the boys had procured one. They drew lots to see which one should accompany Loretta into the church and Jerry won those honors. Mike sighed deeply. Realizing the need, however, for complete cooperation, he took charge of the straw-filled dummy which the two of them had laboriously prepared. On top of it was the famous ostrich-plumed hat, below was the black satin dress and attached to each broomstick ankle was a short chunk of rope by which the dummy could easily be attached to the mouse-colored pony Loretta always tied at the rear of the church.

Jerry and Mike had rounded up ten specially vicious-looking longhorns and tied them together, legs and bellies and horns, in the most incongruous mess of beef-on-the-hoof and tangled hemp that ever was seen in any cattleman's nightmare. In the midst of this tangled snarl of steers and horns they left room to tie Loretta's pony with her straw-filled body and beautiful plumed hat rightfully attached.

On Easter morning Jerry had his hands full with Loretta. "There was some trouble with a herd of ornery steers at the ranch this morning," he explained, "and Mike sort of has his hands full. I realize it's awful disappointing just one of us should show up like this, but I assure you, Miss, I shall see you to the worshippin' with a proper thought of the good Lord and all formalities."

LORETTA smiled quite sweetly as Jerry helped her to mount. "Do you know anything about polecats, Mister Brisco?"

Jerry colored plenty and choked somewhat. "Well, no, ma'am, not a very considerable lot."

"Could the skins be cured do you think, and worn on a hat?"

Their horses were jogging along toward the church. Jerry was silent, considering this new phase. "Has someone suggested you should wear them smelly varmints on a hat, Miss?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," she admitted frankly. "You see, I received a couple of skins as a present."

"Oh?"

"I'm not sure whether I'm being insulted, whether it's some sort of practical joke, or if they are of value."

They were at the church now. The old grey-haired sky-pilot was reaching out both hands from the top step and after that ordeal was over, Jerry whispered, "It's my confidential opinion, Miss, you're bein' insulted." He was beginning to feel fidgety. Who ever heard of polecat tails on a hat? Good Lord, should they have put a dead horse in the hat box?

Jerry Brisco enjoyed no part of the service. First he forgot to take off his hat and the sermon was half way through before he got his head bowed. Of course Sid Timpkins was standing at the rear of the tiny church, like he always did. Timpkins stood there every time the B Bar B boys won the first rights on the school marm's company at worshipping, as if maybe they would fall down the steps and break a leg and he could step in and carry through. Besides that Mike was making too much noise outside in back getting the dummy onto Loretta's horse. All the horses tied there got to whinnying and acting up in general. Once

the sky-pilot stopped a hymn and started it over. Perspiration came out on Jerry for fear somebody would go out to quiet the horses.

But everything finally ended all right. Folks began crowding up to shake hands with the sky-pilot and, of course, that was something the school marm was expected to take part in. But Jerry's work was cut out for him. He took Loretta's arm with more firm determination than he had ever dared before, so much in fact, that she looked up at him with a new kind of admiration. "We've got to slip out the side door," he decided, "because I've got to take you home so I can get back and help Mike with them steers."

Jerry knew such talk was neither polite nor good courting but he had to get the real Loretta out of Sid Timpkin's sight before the dummy came. At the rear of the church there was no horse for Loretta. Jerry looked about in pretended surprise. "Nobody'd steal it, surely, not on Sunday, right behind the church."

Then it happened.

They heard the pound of hoofs. A herd of steers appeared. They came plunging down the main street. Jerry grabbed Loretta's arm and half jerked her off her feet. "Stampede," he yellow loudly and pulled her close against the corner of the building.

The B Bar B boys had planned carefully. From the spot where Jerry so carefully protected Loretta the Cattle Center school marm could see what happened in the street but Sid Timpkins couldn't see her from the front of the building.

Men, women and children came tumbling from the church. Somebody echoed the word, "Stampede," a B Bar B cowboy in fact, whom Jerry and Mike had paid two dollars for that very act.

The girl held tight to Jerry. "Oh," she screamed. "Right here in town, I hope nobody gets injured."

Jerry was on the verge of saying, "I hope somebody does," but he halted himself in time.

THE betangled steers came jerking forward. Mike was behind them yelling, "Somebody head them critters off, somebody stop 'em, somebody shoot a couple of 'em." Mike was banging his own sixgun into the air. To all the old-timers of Cattle Center this was plainly a prank. But the oldsters held healthy respect for such pranks in a community where humor and amusement was scarce and doubtful at best.

The steers were abreast of Jerry and Loretta now. Loretta saw the girl in the plumed hat and recognized her own horse. A frown creased her forehead. Jerry saw the frown and understood her thinking so he held onto her arm mighty tight. She wasn't going to spoil the fun at this late minute. Sid Timpkins was already dashing from the front steps. "My God, it's Miss Todd," he yelled and dashed forward into the street.

The roped steers dashed down upon him. Timpkins made a flying leap. He landed belly-across a big sway-back and tried to stand up. His body made a twist to rouse honest jealousy in the heart of the man on the flying trapeze. But Timpkins moved forward. He landed between two of the on-rushing critters and was tripped up by the rope that held them together. He did a flip, landed on one shoulder, somersaulted onto his feet and grabbed the bridle of Loretta's pony. With remarkable agility he swung around the creature's neck and stood for a moment almost on its head. Then he made a flying tackle. His arms encircled the stuffed girl; he plunged to earth and the ridiculous spectacle swept on.

The still Sabbath air trembled with laughter. Rufe Callister stood on the church steps, his belly bobbing up and down beyond control. The cattle-buyer from Jink's City seemed to be in a convulsion. Doc Reynolds laughed till his face looked like a red lantern. The boss began to choke. Even the old sky-pilot couldn't keep his gold-edged Bible from vibrating in his grasp.

Sid Timpkins just sat quietly in the mud, looking at what he held his arms around. The dummy sat upright beside him, nodding a little, as if its straw lips might kiss his dirty-be-

grimed and sweaty forehead. The hat with white ostrich plumes, flapped nonchalantly on its top.

Mike Gladstone pulled up and had to slide from his mount to keep his laughter from shaking him off. He knew the glory of complete success. No man in Cattle Center would pass Sid Timpkins upon the street for weeks to come without a chuckle. The dude, this time, had been made a laughing stock for certain. No woman could stand continuous ridicule.

No?

Loretta had broken away from Jerry. She plunged into the street. She paid no attention whatever to Sid Timpkins sitting there in the mud, not at first. It was only the dummy which seemed to interest her. She fussed with its straw neck, untied a black silk ribbon. There was no hat upon her head because she had not had a thing to wear that morning. Now she donned the gorgeous black thing with feathers.

The hat was tilted toward the church. As Loretta reached forward toward Sid Timpkins those who watched could not see what happened behind it but the sound was like half a dozen horses all pulling their hoofs from mud at one time. "Oh, Sid, Sid," the girl cried. "You saved it; you saved the hat. It's not even muddy."

Well, of course, everybody was disgusted. Such a performance right in the middle of the street, the town school marm sitting in the mud kissing a rank tenderfoot from Noo York. Neither Mike nor Jerry would put up with such nonsense. Each extended a hand to the other and each took one resolutely. "If that's the kind she is," Mike said, "he can have her."

The boss overheard. Jacobs was about the only one to see any fun in the situation right at that moment. "It wouldn't be a case of sour grapes now, would it, boys?" the old man suggested.

THE END

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THE HORSE FROM HELL

The Story Of Satan, King Of Wild Stallions

By Kenneth P. Wood

(Author of "Blackie," "Olson Runs a Whizer" etc.)

FOR many years, Satan, Tom Kirby's big black fighting stallion was a prelude and finale to all wild horse yarns along the sand-swept frontier of the Divide when riders got together and talked about "hossflesh." From the *Llano Estacado* of New Mexico to the border of Texas the mustang's unsavory fame extended, for not only was the brute vicious and indomitable, but it was common knowledge in part of the State that the horse had killed two men in three years of captivity. Then he escaped to the hills and became a tradition.

Kirby's ranch hands swore that the beast, whose reputation was as black as his coat, had been sired by the devil himself. That the "horse from Hell" as they so aptly called him, was not a mere outlaw bronc, but an equine assassin, for, in a fit of vengeful rage he had brutally trampled Kirby's swamper to death. To them this demon of a horse was a formidable element and an unknown quantity, so they gave his Satanic Majesty a wide berth.

But Kirby was hell-for-leather and had a well-earned reputation as a bronc peeler. He had ridden other renegades when the volcanic brutes had killed far stronger men. He was the sort that would mount on a meteor then rake it with his spurs. Being as indomitable as the big black, he was the only man in the Staked Plain country who could handle the man-killer with any degree of certainty—but not always security—for Satan had never really been broken, just partially subdued, and the rancher had to pit all of his skilled horsemanship against the stallion's cunning and ferocity.

Satan came out of that last stamping ground of wild herds, the sand-blown region below the Canadians, and he had the fire of the desert implanted in his nature. After his dash for freedom into the wilderness there naturally sprang up about him various and sundry legends, most of them highly embroidered half-facts, circulated no doubt by the line riders who got only a fleeting glimpse of the big horse racing across the wastelands, far beyond reach, with the despised man smell still lingering in his nostrils. Whatever the origin of these stories, certain it is that Satan was one of those unconquerable wildings that would never submit to the will of man.

Tom Kirby's little horse spread was on the Pecos River near Spring Lake. From his pastures came the whinney of a score of mustang mares and a piebald stallion. Within his enclosures long-legged colts of sturdy lineage kicked and squaled. Some of the finest stock in the Southwest carried Kirby's brand. To augment his little herd and strengthen the blood, his outfit made periodic excursions into the wilderness to capture the small bands of fuzztails that haunted the hills.

Then one day a saddle bum rode into his spread astride this matchless mountain of horseflesh. Taller it was than any of Kirby's hill-bred stock, fully eighteen hands high, solid as granite and with legs like bars of iron. His crest and wither were firm and sleek, and his broad chest was good to look at. Behind he was mightily made, and the fall of his ribs was perfection. His chiseled head showed the fine strains of the Apache, but his sable coat covered fifteen hundred pounds of latent dynamite, and deep within his white-rimmed full eye the very fires of Hell smoldered. Bellows-sided and with pulsating nostrils, the superb stallion stood by warily as Kirby eyed him speculatively.

THE rider explained that he had roped the horse out on the desert two years before, and when the explosive brute kicked a puncher to death over on the *Mesa Alta*, he was told to take the murderous beast and vamose. But in spite of his villainous reputation the rancher realized the potentialities of such a fine stud, which was capable of running down anything in New Mexico. Kirby took a step forward and ran his appraising hand down the horse's ebony leg, then grasping the velvety muzzle in his hands he pried open the mustang's mouth and looked at

its teeth. But he did not notice the animal lay its ears back as it ordinarily did when approached by strangers. He did not note the stud's eyes watching him steadfastly, nor did he see the quiet fire in them, the low-burning embers of a tumultuously wicked past.

The owner of the stallion being down to leather in his saddlebag readily agreed to swap for one of Kirby's horses, with a worthwhile cash consideration to boot. And for nearly a year afterward Satan ruled over the Kirby spread and was the dominant factor in the little harem of mares.

The following spring there drifted into the ranch two desert rats who had been prospecting along the rocky slopes of the Mescalero Ridge some miles to the northeast. Footsore and hungry they were grateful for a night's lodging, and in appreciation of a small grubstake, imparted to Kirby a valuable piece of intelligence. While scouring the foothills of the Ridge they had happened upon the largest band of fuzzies they had ever seen. Fully three hundred horses the miners said they had counted, roaming around just as loose and free as coyotes. Of course this information whetted the horse-breeder's yen for a big round-up, and he immediately made preparations accordingly.

Wtihin a few days a four-mule wagon started out, escorted by Tom Kirby, Slim Martin, the outfit's foreman and all in all; Vic Boddy, a red-headed segundo, and a nondescript crew of mounted hazers, Mexican vaqueros, and half-breed trailers. Kirby mounted on Satan led the way with Slim Martin, whose little calico pony trotted along briskly beside the big black, with eyes warily alert for a possible hostile nip or kick, while Vic Boddy brought up the rear with a wiry buckskin saddler.

However, Satan was on his good behavior at the moment. He seemed peaceful now to Kirby as he gazed down upon his majestic head while trotting along in rhythmic step with the mule team. The rancher was not only proud of his big mount, but his attachment for it had become singularly deep-rooted. He could hardly believe that Satan had killed two men; *would* not have believed it, unless he himself had been an eye-witness to the second tragedy. The first, he thought, must have been some drunken cowpoke who probably had fallen under the horse's feet. It couldn't have been the stud's fault. The stallion, he tried to convince himself, wouldn't kill a fly. "Would you now, Satan, ol' boy," he murmured as he leaned forward and stroked the hot, shining neck, where the veins stood out like welts.

Of course the bronco would throw in a couple of fancy side-steps once in awhile despite the fact that he was well-curbed, and he would smartly wheel about the wagon and switch his tail rather friskly over the trail. But the sweep of his noble head tugging at the bridle-reins fascinated the rider. Compared to other rawboned mustangs he seemed the king of horses. The arch of his great neck with its mane flashing in the sunlight like a wave of jet was magnificent to behold, and his big liquid eyes were like melted garnets. Yes, from forelock to fetlock, Satan was the champion of stallions—one horse in a million!

For three days the little caravan traveled through barren country consisting of a monotonous expanse of sand, rock and sagebrush aching with loneliness, until the blurred buttes of the Mescalero Mountains loomed in the distance. Then the landscape slowly gave way to the gradual incline of the foothills where straggling groups of cottonwood and alder trees dotted the varicolored patches of buffalo grass and mesquite. Toward evening one of the trailers, riding ahead, pulled up his horse and pointed northward where on a little rise, silhouetted against the flawless amythest sky, some dark objects were moving about.

"WHOOPEE! He's spotted 'em!" Slim Martin called out to Vic Boddy who in turn signaled Tom Kirby.

The rancher stood up in his stir-

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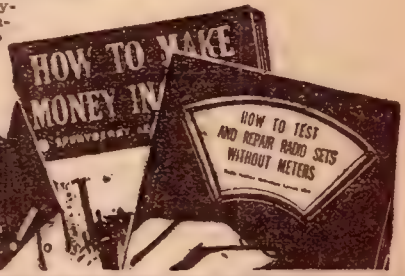

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(Continued From Page 82)

rups and shading his eyes with hands that were red and swollen from holding in the spirited bronc, strained in the direction indicated.

Surely enough, about two miles away he could make out the roving band of mustangs. "Hundreds of 'em," he breathed. "Boy, what a herd!" He could see them plainly now, feeding on the distant hill.

"Well, Slim, them miners warn't kiddin' us after all," he said with a satisfied grin, as he rode up beside the foreman. "But we can't do much with 'em tonight. Too late. We'll camp here in the hollow—looks like water down yonder—and light out after 'em fust thing in the mornin'. They won't get very far durin' the night, I reckon."

Just then Vic Boddy loped up and brought his buckskin to a skidding halt.

"Hey, boss!" he called excitedly, pointing to a number of wooden rails that were protruding almost invisibly from behind a clump of cottonwoods. "Lookee there what I found! An' ol' corral. Purty bad shape though, but nevertheless a corral!"

"Almost too good to be true," Kirby beamed as he turned in the saddle, one hand on the rump of his mount. Then he snapped out a few quick orders.

"Vic, you and Pedro and Manuel get ready to make camp right away. And Slim, take them breeds and start mendin' that corral, pronto. We'll be needin' it tomorrow."

The following morning just as the day-streaks slashed the sky to the eastward low above the buttes, the camp was astir. After a hasty breakfast Kirby slipped the Spanish curb and split-ear bridle over his arm and walked down to a little draw in back of the hoodlum wagon where Satan was tethered. The mustangs still grazed on the far slope, but they had moved around to the windward during the night.

The big man-killer was beside himself as Kirby approached, for his acute nostrils had got wind of the herd and the call of the wild was upon him. When the man grasped the long rawhide picket rope, Satan's

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THESE ISSUES NOW ON SALE

(Continued From Page 85)

ears went back and his eyes showed only the white. He snorted defiantly, viciously, and tossing his mane from side to side, commenced to rear and paw the air frantically, straining at the stout rope with all his demoniac strength.

Kirby started to utter the soft talk that all horses love. "Now, now, Satan," he cooed in his most soothing tones, as he worked his way up the rope hand over hand. "Come now, boy, come. Take it easy, ol' fella."

But the rampant Satan paid no attention to the man's gentle entreaty. Wide-eyed, he stared at the distant herd and continued to rebel against the unbreakable snake-like thing that restrained him from cavorting among his fellows on the ridge.

When the rancher finally reached the stallion's head, and had taken off the halter preparatory to slipping on the bridle, in spite of his extreme caution, the obsessed beast gave a quick and unexpected whirl about, side-swiping the man with his broad flank, and bowled him over into the dust. Like a released arrow the raging mount was off, racing at breakneck speed straight for the herd in the distance.

"Gol durn such a ornery hoss," Kirby muttered as he picked himself up from among the sandburrs. "Just wait 'til I lay my hands on that black . . ."

Then quickly he came to his senses.

"Head him off!" he shrilled. "Head him off!"

"Hang it all, he'll stampede the hull band," groaned Slim, roweling the sides of his calico with an ugly pair of persuaders so quickly that the horse humped himself together and lunged forward wildly.

THE redheaded segundo's grunt of disgust was eloquent.

"Yeah, he'll stampede 'em sure as the devil invented barbed wire," echoed Boddy, as he took up the chase with his wiry little buckskin.

The Mexicans and half-breeds urged their ponies forward, too, but Satan lead the way, gaining with ev-

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As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9000-word treatise. He says the time has come for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. K-291, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.

ery bound. His iron shod hoofs only grazed the trail, striking sparks on the rocks and raising little puffs of flying dust in the wind. But this pace was nothing to his wild dash when he saw the herd just ahead. He gave a loud cry, his head went up, his nostrils flamed, and he rocketed forth, the foam flying back on his neck and shoulders.

Satan plunged into a little arroyo, tossing his head aggressively, then bolted straight up for the herd on the slope, nickering his challenge down the wind. In another moment he was up with them where they cavorted with dancing heels and tossing manes, and plunging into their midst, was as a black wave in a milling sea of horses. The stallion tasted the fierce exultance of freedom, and sniffed it in and snorted it out with every hot breath. All about him surged the great herd he had stampeded, and he drew in the spirit of this huddling, hurrying crowd as one who had starved in long exile for others of his kind.

Kirby, from his position out on the sand, removed his big velour Carlsbad and waved the pursuers back to camp. When they had galloped up beside him, he said in clipped tones: "It's no use now, boys, he's right in the thick o' the herd. Better prepare to round up the whole bunch at once." Turning to the segundo, he said: "Vic, you and Pedro take the first trick. Get out there pronto, and work around to the right. Keep 'em headed this way. Now get goin'!"

Far out on the hillside the big black had whirled suddenly about on his heels and had plunged into a flying fight with a plucky little pinto herd stallion that champed viciously at his throat, tore his mane and sent hot blood streaming down his neck. But the man-killer had no fear of any horse alive. He trumpeted defiance, and while the herd scattered and ran down the slope, he fought at the pinto with his great teeth, the white of his eyes flashing menacingly, and many a time did his jaw close like a steel trap on the neck of his squealing foe.

And so, rearing, tearing down the

(Continued On Page 88)

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long incline in a dun-colored cloud of dust, Satan ran, in and out among the unhaltered herd. Sometimes he and the hard-mouthed pinto that hung upon him would stop, and with heads high in the air they would swing at each other with raised forefeet, which struck thudding blows on shoulder and side. Here Satan, besides his greater weight, had the advantage of well-shod hoofs, but the other horse was the quicker and tougher of the two and he implanted more blows on the big broad front of the black than Satan could possibly give his wiry antagonist. Then on they would plunge again, side by side, gnashing at each other, shrilling and gruffing, and stamping at each other's legs.

Nearly two hours had passed by and they were still at it, fighting incessantly while they ran, until just as the tired herd settled down to browse in a big grassy basin, the pinto fell a little behind. Satan stopped and was preparing to slake his thirst in an alkali-whitened pool, when he heard a snort, and felt a sharp kick in his flank. Upon receiving this delicate attention, he turned quickly, darted forward and seizing the challenger by the back of the neck bore him down to the ground. Satan threw his fifteen hundred pounds of weight upon the pinto as he rolled him over and dashed his heavy hoofs in his rival's belly again and again, as if trying to stamp him into the very earth. He snorted hot vengeful breaths down on the struggling horse while hearing with a victor's delight the pinto's despairing death groans.

The big black felt exhausted and bruised after the fight, but he pranced back to the alkali-pool and drank deep draughts of the warm, brackish water. He had slain the leader of the herd and now enjoyed the proud sense of being himself enthroned, secure and unassailable. Although his shoulders were sore and his neck bloody, he paced back and forth before the brood mares and fillies like an equine god. From a man-killer he had suddenly been transformed into a lady-killer. From being a haltered

slave, bidden here and there and made to do the loathsome deeds of servility, he was now a very Solomon. And he reveled in the glorious wildness of the feel of his new-found freedom. It was a joy to be alive on the illimitable desert, in the sun and in the wind.

HE WAS hungry now, and down there in that strip of grama grass on the slope among the other horses he would satisfy his hunger. But soon he heard the snorts of the herd to windward. They had caught the evil news of the coming trailers, for whose scent they were subtly alert, and so on they moved again, and Satan with them, leading the way—free, it was true, but not unassailable after all. Now he would halt, the herd at his heels, submissive to his will, and would look about for the danger signs. Yes, there were the trailers, always the trailers — two men, never more — one riding behind and one to the right of the band, swinging them around in a great circle, though all unknowing, as it seemed to them that the way led ahead and out of danger.

For this is the rule of the horse hunt, though Satan knew it not, that those behind, with compelling insistence, were really keeping his trotting band ever circling, circling, that the two in pursuit may be relayed and rested until their turn comes again. But there is to be no rest for the herd—no rest at all, and no grass nor water except what may be caught up hungrily, thirstily, wearily, but only in passing, and all insufficiently, a mere snatch at the grass, a sip of water and then off again in the same wide circle.

Satan, head and shoulders above them all, would look over the retreating army wavering behind him, and try to charge them with his indomitable spirit. In the trot around the great unstaked course, he had pulled himself together, and in spite of his hunger and his bruises he still felt physically fit and equal to the task. But the herd had not eaten hard oats and sweet, clean alfalfa which had been his daily fare for the

(Continued On Page 90)

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past couple of years. They were not, like him, bottomed and muscled and above all spirited with high living. They were rough enough and tough enough, but they were rackboned and had not his red corpuscles and well-being. A common cayuse might be worn out by wild mustangs, but a Satan, never.

Far in advance now, the new leader chafed to see his laggard followers waver, with drooped heads and halting hoofs. All the urge of his great virile force rang out in his commanding neighs. It irked him desperately to note their rallies grow feebler and feebler. Did they not see the nearing of the meshes—the closing-in of the herders? Were their very discernings dulled by the chase? Oh, if but to them, as to him, freedom were something new, and so full of vital meaning—would they then keep it at any cost.

The stud did not know that at the moment a fresh vaquero and a fresh half-breed, the one behind, and the other to the right, had dropped in to take the place of the two fatigued pursuers, and that leader and herd were compelled to circle again, always the circle, of which the camp-wagon, with its store of food and force, was the rallying, relentless center. And as the long hours of the chase went by and the harried herd, spent with hunger and exhaustion, gradually lent lassid resistance to the iron wills of the herders, Satan saw before him the long wing of the corral.

The stallion had been acute enough to notice that as the herd tamed down submissively, the number of pursuers had increased. All of Kirby's riders had now joined in the chase, and the rancher himself was among them, badly mounted on one of the wagon mules. The old corral, now repaired, was a sturdy one, and Satan's horror of it, after his new-found freedom, was something greater than he had ever felt for fence rails before. He tried vainly to lead the herd away from the open mouth with its long delusive wing, but the riders to right and left kept the band headed straight for the fatal gate-

way, and nearer and nearer they came to it. Satan furtively dodged around a clump of cottonwood trees, away from the wing, and vainly signaled to the band to follow him, but the will of men was just then the dominant power, and only a few of the younger and stronger horses trailed after him. The others passed forward along the wing and through the gateway of the fenced enclosure.

The "horse from Hell" walked up and down, deliberately refusing to see the opening, and then trotted slowly to the right, away from the wing. But before him rode Tom Kirby, Slim Martin and Vic Boddy. So the big black and his few bewildered followers, still ignoring the corral mouth, went back toward the end of the wing, hoping to round it, but there Manuel on his mount, acting as "gate horse" quietly headed him off. Back again ambled Satan, all eyes for a chance to dash through the cordon and away, while the three hazers slowly closed in.

"Dammit, we'd 'a' got 'em all hours ago, if it warn't fer that black devil," Slim grumbled. Then he started in his saddle. "Hey, you, Manuel! Look out there—he's a-comin' back!"

SATAN stole toward the end of the wing again, with the shaggy mustangs at his heels, but there was no getting around the wing while the gate horse guarded it, nor taking off by the back trail. So he gathered himself for a dash straight across the mouth of the corral, and, with a sudden snort and swing, flung in between Slim and Boddy and their vainly circling lariats, and bolted down among the scattered cottonwoods and off over the desert. All alone he scampered, for his panting followers fell back and were soon driven into the corral, where the rasping gate closed quickly behind them.

"Waal, we got 'em all 'cept that big black un," said the ramrod, wiping the perspiration from his eyes. "But he'll come back again."

"Do you think so?" Kirby asked hopefully.

"Yeah. He'll come back to hang

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around the other hosses. If he gets within rifle shot, why, I'll crease him."

"You'd better have a steady eye and a limber trigger finger," cautioned the horse breeder. "Wouldn't want nothin' to happen to Satan."

"Naw. I'll just nick him on top o' the neck an' drap him. Then we kin get a rope onto him, an' haul him in."

And surely enough, while the outfit was enjoying an early supper, Satan came stalking back, grazing quietly and furtively as he came. For the herd instinct is stronger in the heart of a horse than it is in the heart of a man. The big black stood off on a little knoll near the corral and signaled in a friendly way to the imprisoned broomtails.

Slim, Winchester in hand, rode a little way toward him, and Satan trotted off a hundred yards and then stopped, looking back at the corral. The foreman lined up his sights and took deliberate aim at the stallion, the distance being a good one for such a delicate shot.

There was an instantaneous spurt of fire in the twilight, and as the echoes tossed the rifle report back and forth between the hills, Satan dropped down on his knees.

"Good shot!" yelled Kirby, riding up. "Now gimme that rifle and get a rope on him quick."

Slim urged his mount forward, whirled and threw his riata, and it tightened tensely to Satan's wild pull, for now he was on his feet again, his great head working back and forth and tossing in the air as he endeavored to shake himself free of the noose.

The foreman felt his saddle horn creak under the strain of the sawing lariat, and, range-hardened horseman though he was, he knew that he had special work cut out for him. But what he had hardly calculated upon was what now happened; Satan, snorting defiance, with the red of his nostrils and the white of his teeth showing below his great murderous eyes, charged suddenly down upon the man, his thick neck puffed with rage, and the rope trailing loosely where he ran. So quickly did the

obsessed beast spring on Slim and seize his chap-covered leg, that the foreman instantly and unconsciously prodded the sides of his calico and it bolted toward the nearest cottonwood. But this quick, almost subconscious gesture was an inspiration, as it bore Satan between the ridden horse and the tree, where he lost vantage in the crash. His head was down, but his teeth still clung with diabolical tenacity to the batwing of the ramrod's chaps.

Kirby rushed over and struck at Satan's nose with the rifle barrel, and though the force of the blow was not great because of the intervening tree, it was enough to make the mustang give up his hold on the foreman's leg. Slim Martin quickly put the cottonwood between himself and the enraged animal. Then the wily Satan ran around the tree after him, the rope taking a turn about it and bringing him up so short that his head received a smart knock against the trunk. Slim, as angry a buckaroo as ever forked a kak, snatched the Winchester from Kirby's hand and riding near, tried to strike Satan on the head with the butt, despite the wild protests of the rancher. But the stallion jerked back sharply on the rope, so sharply in fact, that it snapped off close to his neck, and he bounded away amid a loud volley of oaths and a rapid, but futile firing of shots from the foreman.

"WAAL, the devil's on the hoof again," Slim snorted with disgust. "That's the last you'll see o' that hell hoss!"

Tom Kirby, arms akimbo and with pursed lips stared forlornly after the flying horse as it melted into the twilight, scurrying on alone across the gray, silent desert, faring forth in an ecstasy of high feeling, as one who had valiantly fought for freedom and had gloriously won. On and on Satan continued his solitary course. He heeded not the herd he had left behind for instinct told him there were other bands, with other leaders, to fight and conquer out in that free, wind-blown wilderness so loved of his wild youth.

THE END

JUDGE BATES, RAIN-MAKER

By Lee Floren

(Author of "No Range For An Outcast," "Buck McKee's Gun-smoke Trap" etc.)

"Polecats who'll kill and maim dozens of innocent bystanders just to get one man don't deserve so easy an end as hanging," Judge Bates opined. And if he didn't avenge the murderous "accident" at Jed Harkins' farm, he'd see everything he'd built up in his years of law enforcement go to smash!

BECAUSE of the crowded court-calendar, Judge Lemanuel Bates was forced to hold evening sessions. Now, at midnight, the fat jurist was asleep in his judicial chambers, his boots resting on his desk, his corpulent body crammed into his swivel-chair. Dreams played lazily across his tired brain. Once again he was a youngster running wild horses out of the badlands. And once again—

A hard hand pushed his boots to the floor. "That danged bronc must've throwed me," he mumbled. Reality returned as he looked sleepily up at the homely face of his partner, Postmaster Tobacco Jones.

"What'd you want, Tobacco?"

Tobacco Jones shifted his chew so he could talk faster. "That danged cannon blew up, Judge, and a bunch of the farmers got hurt! They're a-carryin' them into Cowtrail now!

The women are bawlin' and kids are hollerin'."

"What cannon?"

"The Rainmaker's cannon!"

Judge Bates reached under his desk for his gallon jug, uncorked it, and drank deeply. "I always figured that rainmaker was a big fraud; I shoulda run him outa the country when he barged into town with that smooth talk of his an' that Civil War cannon. He had the cannon out to Jed Harkins' farm, didn't he?"

Tobacco bit off a chew of Star. "Yep, Judge. They fired the contraption tonight. The rainmaker said they needed a dark night 'cause they'd be more apt to get rain if'n it was shot when it was awful dark. Somethin' about the lead an' the powder'd be more apt to make rain on a dark night. But the whole cannon blew up."

"Jed Harkins get hurt?"

Tobacco shook his head slowly. "Badly hurt, Judge."

The judge ambled to the gunrack on the wall. He took down his double-barreled, ten-gauge shotgun and broke it. Two dull cartridges rested in the gun's barrels. He crammed some shotgun shells in his pocket, took his whiskey jug and went out the door, with Tobacco Jones following.

"Danged fool farmers," he was mumbling.

Judge Bates saw lanterns moving down the street. The babble of excited voices came across the dark night; buggies and lumber wagons had drawn up before the hotel. A group of men with improvised stretchers were carrying the injured into the hostelry.

A stocky man, husky and hard, stepped out of the shadows, took Bates' arm. "What's up, Judge?"

"What you doin' in town?" asked Judge Bates. "Thought you an' your roundup crew was workin' the Purple Hills country?"

"Ain't no law ag'in me comin' to town," growled the man. "I asked you a civil question an' I expect a civil answer."

Judge Bates tried to keep the testiness from his voice. But nevertheless a harsh undertone underlined his words. "The rainmaker's cannon exploded, Martin. By the way, fellow, what is that rainmaker's name?"

"How would I know? I'm a cowman, not a danged rainmaker!"

"You an' him seem to be pretty good friends, Martin. I've seen you two hobnobbing together around town a number of times."

"You drink too much, Bates," said Martin, angrily.

THE judge's lips hardened. Tobacco Jones hurriedly tugged his partner's sleeve; they went on down the street.

"The rainmaker's name," said Tobacco, "is Smith."

"I know that; I was just riling Martin. Martin hates the farmers. The rainmaker promised to bring rain for the farmers, therefore him and Martin should have been enemies, not friends.

"Martin always has plenty of money. Where does he get it?"

"He's got his ranch, Judge."

"He ain't makin' both ends meet out there in that hardscrabble country, Tobacco. There ain't no grass out there and danged little water. He gets his money some other way."

"But how?"

"I wish I knew. . ."

They pushed through the curious townspeople, who had gathered around the hotel, and entered the lobby. Kerosene lamps cast guttering shadows across the people gathered there. Some of the wounded lay on benches or sat slumped in chairs. Mrs. Pittman, a gray-haired farmer's wife, was seated in a chair, and Doc Smart was working on her shoulder. The medico answered the judge's questions curtly. Yes, some of the farmers were very badly wounded. Yes, Jed Harkins was hurt bad. Sonny Carter and old man Platt had been killed outright.

"Where's Smith, doc?"

"He's upstairs, Bates. Jed Harkins is up there, too, in bed."

Smith and a farmer were in Harkins' room. The rainmaker's furtive eyes flicked from the judge to Tobacco. Short, well-dressed, he had

a tight mouth; he shook his head dolefully.

"Jed Harkins is hurt bad, men."

Harkins' whiskers were matted with dried blood. He was an elderly man, thin and wiry—a Pinkerton detective who had been sent into this section two years before to try to clean up the holdups and robberies that had occurred, and were still occurring, on the local railroads. Only Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones knew he was not really a farmer.

Judge Bates spoke to Smith and the farmer. "You two men make tracks out of here. We want to talk to Harkins alone."

"About what?" asked Smith.

"Close the door when you leave," said the judge.

The farmer left. Smith stood there, eyes sharp pinpoints probing the judge. "Jed Harkins is my friend, Bates. The doc says he is low. He may die; I wanta be near him when—"

"Get out!"

"I ain't—"

Smith's words died unuttered, for Tobacco Jones had grabbed the rainmaker by the collar and the seat of the pants. The lanky postmaster dragged the struggling rainmaker down the hall, pushed him down the stairs. He came back, shutting the door behind him. Judge Bates knelt beside Harkins.

"What happened, Jed?"

"Damn cannon exploded." The wounded man smiled weakly. "Reckon I got so interested in my dry land farmin' that I plumb forgot I was a detective. I sure got roped hard when that would-be rainmaker came into the country, but everybody wasn't hurt by the explosion of the cannon."

"What'd you mean?"

"Sure, the cannon exploded, Judge; blew its nozzle wide open. But that wasn't the only thing that exploded. A charge of dynamite musta been planted under the cannon, 'cause the whole ground exploded."

"Dynamite? Who—?"

"Dunno who would have planted it. But I was doin' lotta work lately on that train-robbin' business an' I mighta stepped on somebody's toes. . ." The man's voice trailed off and became silent.

Judge Bates got to his feet. "He's passed out, Tobacco."

Tobacco did not answer. Silently, he tiptoed to the door, opened it suddenly. Smith had been listening outside, his ear to the keyhole. He lurched into the room. Judge Bates grabbed him.

"You dirty sneak!" snapped the judge.

"Honest, Judge, I—"

JUDGE BATES' right fist crashed into Smith's jaw. The blow sent the man reeling backwards through the door. Moving swiftly despite his bulk, Judge Bates went forward, and hit again. Smith flung up a wild left. The judge went under it, his knuckles grinding on Smith's jaw.

Again Smith staggered backwards. He hit the top of the stairs, tripped and disappeared, his arms flailing. Tobacco Jones heard the rainmaker hit the lobby floor with a thud. The postmaster smiled, but his smile was grim.

"Now why was he a-listenin' in, Judge?"

Judge Bates studied a skinned knuckle. "You got me, Tobacco." He tilted his jug, drank deeply. "I smell skunk oil, fella."

Tobacco bit off a chew. "The night," he said, "might prove to be interestin', at that. . ."

Sheriff Whiting came down the hall. He was a slab-sided, homely man with a one-track mind. "Why for you tyin' into Smith, Bates?"

The judge grinned. "He insulted me," he said.

Whiting mopped his narrow forehead. The judge told him to station a deputy to guard Jed Harkins, and the sheriff's brows rose. Judge Bates had often wondered if the sheriff had ever known that Harkins was a Pinkerton man; now he knew Whiting had been kept in the dark.

"Why guard Harkins, Bates?"

"Don't ask no questions. Just post a guard over him."

"You can't order me aroun'," declared Whiting. "I'm the law here.

(Continued On Page 98)

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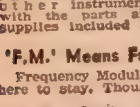

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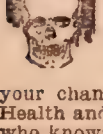

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(Continued From Page 96)

I don't need to post no guard unless I want to—"

Judge Bates said, testily, "Don't get high-horse with me, Whiting! Trouble is, you don't know your law. Read the Statutes of 1891, Book 15, Section 3, pages 19 to 56. You'll find out different then."

Whiting spoke grudgingly. "Okay, I'll put Hank on guard."

The two partners went down the back-stairs, walked down the alley, entered the livery-barn. The hostler was evidently down at the hotel. They rode silently out of town, heading east. Tobacco frowned and asked where they were going.

"Out to Jed Harkins' farm."

Tobacco spat. "We're headin' the wrong direction, Judge. Harkins' farm is west, not east."

"I know that."

They hit the rough country, the judge in the lead. They circled wide, riding across lava beds; they turned west. Suddenly Tobacco's homely face beamed.

"Afraid somebody might be trackin' us, huh? Now who would be follerin' us?" The postmaster bit off a chew. "Night black as the inside of a black bull an' you're afraid somebody'll be trackin' us!"

"Smith might."

"Smith! Why, heck, he's only an innercent ol' rainmaker, a fake!"

"Maybe so. . . But somebody aims to kill Jed Harkins. That means they've found out he's a Pinkerton man. There's two ways to kill a man: down him in a gunfight or make his death look accidental. . ."

"Wonder where Hipshot Johnson is, Judge. Him an' Jed Harkins was partners. Funny Hipshot wasn't in town."

"That *is* odd," said Bates.

The Harkins' farm was situated on a small meadow. It consisted of a log house, a henhouse, and a barn. They hunkered in the buckbrush and studied the outfit under the dawn's uncertain light.

They could see the cannon; it was beyond the barn. The broken, shattered barrel extended upward, the sod around its base torn and uprooted.

The judge cupped his hands and called, "Hipshot."

His unanswered cry echoed across the hill. He called again, got no return. They left their broncs there and went on foot to the house. The judge knocked twice; there was no reply. They tramped from room to room; the cabin was deserted. They went to the barn.

The milk cow was bawling over an empty manger and they turned her loose. She waddled outside to graze. They turned the hungry work team loose, too.

"Hipshot's saddlehorse is gone," grunted the judge. "He must have pulled out. Otherwise he would never have left that cow and team behind to starve. Wonder which direction he went?"

"Let's take a look at the cannon, judge."

THERE was a big hole at the cannon's base. A terrible explosion had occurred there. The judge's heavy face was severe; somebody had wanted to kill Jed Harkins. And, in so trying, they had almost killed half of the neighborhood.

Judge Bates knelt, studied the sod. Tobacco watched, his jaw working. Then the judge got to his feet; he drank deeply, lowered his jug. He went to the henhouse. There, in the corner, was a man's tracks—a man who had worn high-heeled riding boots. Tobacco glanced inquiringly at the judge.

"Had the dynamite wired," the judge explained. "Had the plunger in here. Some cowman set it off; look at them boot marks."

Tobacco did not answer. That was because he was too busy jumping, for a rifle bullet had whizzed through the door. It beat into the wall behind him, coming from the thick brush above the house.

Glass crashed as Judge Bates pushed his shotgun through a window. Hard on that silvery sound came the roar of the jurist's scattergun. A rifle ball plowed through the window. The judge flattened himself hurriedly against the wall.

"Somebody's prob'ly been trailing

(Continued On Page 100)

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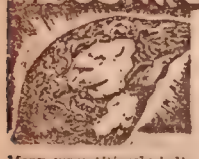

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(Continued From Page 99)

us," he grunted. "Waited until we walked right into their trap."

"What'll we do, Judge?"

Judge Bates drank, wiped his mouth. "These shotguns aren't much good for us; the range is too long. We have to get out of this henhouse."

"We can't go out the door, Judge. We'll stop lead for sure if we do. An' there ain't no door or window in the back of this contraption."

"I'll make one, Tobacco."

The building was made of thin siding. The judge bunched his powerful legs and lunged forward, his shoulder jutting. Nails strained, and siding creaked. The judge bounced back, then once again, muscles bunched, he lunged forward.

Again his weight smashed into the wall. Again nails creaked and siding bulged. This time, though, he broke a hole in the wall. He sprawled outside. A rifle bullet geysered dirt beside him.

Tobacco, sighting out the window, let his hammers fall and beebees sprinkled the brush. That brief respite gave the judge his chance. He ran wildly for the barn, and disappeared inside.

Tobacco smiled; the judge was safe. He could go out a rear window, get into the brush, circle their ambusher, and shoot him down. Suddenly Tobacco heard two rifles snarling on the hill. One rifle spoke twice, the other once; Tobacco frowned.

"I killed the gent that was tryin' to ambush you," a voice called from the brush. "Who are you? Bates an' Jones?"

Tobacco and the judge stepped into the open.

"Come out there," said the judge.

The voice held a grimness. "Cain't, men; I got a bullet in me. You'll have to sashay up here. . ."

Hipshot Johnson was shot through the breast. His grimy claws clutched a Winchester .30-30. Pain showed on his leathery face. Yet a smile was on his quivering lips.

"What happened?" asked Judge Bates.

"I was hidin' up on the hill. I

heered you call for me an' I started down. I ran into this gent—" He gestured at the man who lay face-down about fifty yards away. "—an' he planted a bullet in me afore I could kill him."

Judge Bates toed the man over; he was dead. The rat-like face of Smith, the rainmaker, stared up at him. A bullet had torn through Smith's throat. He was not a pretty sight and revulsion ran through the judge; but mixed with this were unanswered questions that troubled the fat man.

Judge Bates knelt beside Hipshot. The rifle ball had driven through bone and gristle an inch above the oldster's heart. The man's pulse was rapid and weak; he would die, soon.

"Why'd Smith shoot at us, Hipshot?"

"Smith's in cahoots with Martin. Martin an' his gang has been robbin' the trains aroun' here. Martin ain't no rancher—he's an outlaw. . ."

JUDGE BATES frowned. "But why did Smith try to kill Jed Harkins with that danged cannon?"

"Jed told me he was a detective. I got likkered up in Cowtrail one day, and I musta talked to Martin. Then Smith come into this section, and Jed, the poor fool, fell for his rainmakin' scheme."

"Did Smith blow up that cannon to try to kill Jed?"

"I reckon so. Right afore it popped Smith went into the henhouse. He had dynamite all under the cannon, too. Cold-blooded murder, I calls it. All them other people—them innercent farmers—"

Hipshot's lips trembled violently. Judge Bates got to his feet, his face solemn. Many thoughts ran through the fat jurist's agile brain. The savagery of this murderous scheme filled him with surging anger. There was but one way to counteract this unleashed violence—oppose it with greater violence.

"We're gettin' you into Doc Smart's office, Hipshot. Then Tobacco and I are riding for Martin's spread."

"No use ridin' out to Martin's, Judge. Ride to the cave. . . Crystal

(Continued On Page 102)

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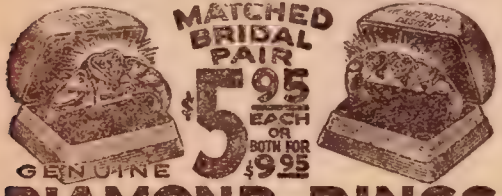

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(Continued From Page 101)

Springs." Hipshot's eyes opened; he smiled. "Often wondered what it would be like. . .to die. 'Tain't hard, Bates. . ."

Silence fell, lengthened. Tobacco Jones stared at the dead man, his jaws working slowly. Judge Bates swallowed, uncorked his jug, and drank. Then, somewhere in the cottonwoods, a magpie took up his scolding rhythm. Tobacco looked at the judge.

"We oughta notify Sheriff Whiting, huh?"

"Whiting, hell! That dust-brained—" Judge Bates halted, squinting down into the basin below. "Ain't that Whiting and a posse down by them two hills?"

"Sure is, Judge! Now what the—?"

"Get your horse, Tobacco."

Sheriff Whiting curbed in his sweaty bronc. His posse, consisting of Cowtrail hanger-ons and loafers, milled their lathered broncs around the judge and Tobacco. The judge asked what was going on.

"The Cowtrail bank was robbed this mornin'! While the whole town was busy helpin' them injured people a gang pulled in an' looted the bank. Nobody knew about it until the clerk reported for work this mornin'; I figure the Hideaway gang must be operatin' in this section!"

Judge Bates ran a speculative eye over the posse. The whole caboodle would jackrabbit at the sight of a cocked rifle. With difficulty, he made his voice serious.

"Where you going now, Whiting?"

"Headin' for the Red Rock country. For a while, I figured that maybe the gang had come in from the direction of Martin's outfit. But Martin said him an' his men had come in that way an' hadn't seen a rider on the road. You ridin' with us, Bates?"

The judge shifted in saddle. "Already got boils on my legs," he lied. "This is a job for you young bucks. Good bunch of fighting men you have there, Sheriff."

"Good bunch, Bates." Whiting spurred away with his men following. The judge took a long drink. Tobacco thoughtfully rolled his cud,

his cynical eyes on the departing group.

"You must be gettin' soft, Judge. That bunch of lugheads couldn't catch a two-day old jackrabbit with a dozen hound dogs."

The judge laughed. "You take everything too literally, Tobacco."

"What'd you mean—*literally?*"

"Look it up in your dictionary when you get back to Cowtrail. Who do you think robbed that bank?"

"Well, I sure don't figure it was the Hideaway gang; they're down in Wyomin'. Musta been Martin. Remember when he talked to us last night? He was standin' in front of the bank then. His men coulda been aroun' the back."

"That's right," said the judge.

Tobacco scratched his stubbled jaw. "But I don't get this about that cave that Hipshot mentioned. Out by Crystal Springs, he said."

"That ain't too much rawhide," said the judge. "From what I gather, Hipshot and Jed Harkins had been scouting around. They musta found out that most of Martin's gang hide out in the cave; that stands to reason. Martin's only a two-by-four rancher; if he had a big gang of men hanging around people would get suspicious."

"I don't remember about a cave, though."

"Neither do I," admitted the judge. "But we'll find it."

THEY rode toward Martin's outfit. Anger filled the judge's corpulent body, anger directed toward Martin and his killers. He had fought for years to bring law and order into the Cowtrail country. Now one man, leading a pack of gunmen, had brought all his work tumbling uselessly about him.

Martin's ranch was situated in the rough country. They rode through jackpine, buckbrush, and chokecherry bushes. Nor did they ride openly into the ranch. They swung east and then hunkered on a high butte, their broncs hidden.

Heat-devils danced across the hills. Judge Bates, his eyes sharp, studied

(Continued On Page 104)

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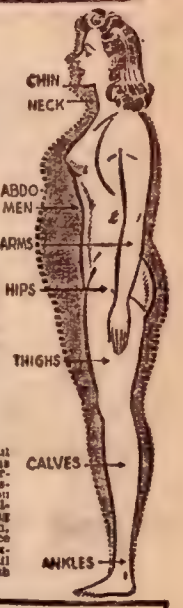

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(Continued From Page 103)

the place through his field glasses. Finally he handed them to Tobacco.

"Look at that brush flanking the trail, right below the barn."

Tobacco looked, spat. "Got a guard posted, huh?"

Judge Bates uncorked his jug. Tobacco watched him drink. Raw whiskey tumbled down the jurist's leathery throat. Despite his hatred for hard drink, Tobacco Jones felt admiration in the judge's ability to imbibe.

"How do you hold all that acid, Judge? Your seams sure must be soldered."

"Not soldered," corrected the judge. "They're welded."

Tobacco grunted. "We ain't doin' nothin' here. First time I ever seen two grown men out huntin' for a cave like a coupla kids. Hipshot mentioned Crystal Springs; the Springs are over west of here."

"Look, Tobacco."

The guard had left his hideout post. Evidently he was making a tour of inspection. He was a poor woodsman. They settled back, watching him. He walked about ten feet away from them and their broncs, and he did not see them.

"What a guard," breathed the judge.

Tobacco tore off a chew. "Prob'ly studied a book put out by Sears an' Roebuck," he admitted. "Hey, there comes some of Martin's men, Judge."

"Four men, an' Martin ain't with them. And they've come from Crystal Springs. Let's ride over that direction, fellow."

Thirty minutes later they were hidden in the buckbrush above Crystal Springs. The springs, fed by seepage down the steep bank, were surrounded by green brush. Judge Bates studied the scene and drank.

"Hipshot must've been talking through his Stetson, Tobacco. I can't see no cave down below us."

Tobacco pointed. "Look, Judge!"

A slim trickle of blue smoke, almost invisible against the bright daylight, was trailing out of a deep fissure in a rock, directly across the canyon from them.

"Maybe it's a volcano, Judge."

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 104)

Judge Bates held his smile. "That smoke is comin' from a fire inside the cliff. Martin an' his gang—or somebody—must be holed up inside that hill."

Somewhere below them was an entrance to the cave. Suddenly the judge got the answer.

"Old man Swenson used to mine in this locality, Tobacco. He dammed up Sawdust creek and used it for hydraulic mining. He told me once he had sunk a deep shaft into that hill. But where is its entrance?"

"Here comes a rider, Judge."

Bates recognized the horseman below as a Martin hand. The man rode into a clump of heavy brush lining the canyon's wall. Judge Bates waited for him to emerge from the brush; he did not. Tobacco's eyes held an unvoiced question.

"That shaft is hidden behind that brush, Tobacco. It must be big enough to ride into. They're in there now—horses and all."

"How we goin' to get 'em out?"

The judge swore evenly. "Danged bunch of cutthroat killers! Workin' that dirty rainmaker trick— Blowing up all them innocent farmers— I'd like to drown them out— Hey, why not do just that, Tobacco?"

"Do what?"

"Drown the rats outa their hole!"

"And how?"

"See where that smoke comes out? Old man Swenson's reservoir ain't far from there. Follow me, fellow."

Tobacco Jones followed, his shotgun akimbo. This scheme sounded very crazy to him, but he had seen too many of the judge's seemingly crazy plans materialize. They moved through the brush, and came to the reservoir.

A ROCK dam blocked the small creek. Behind it stood a deep pool of clear water. Old Swenson had installed a spillway and a check-gate. The check-gate was closed and the trickle of water ran over the spillway. This water then slipped down the cliff and fed Crystal Springs.

"About a hundred and fifty feet to where the smoke comes out, Tobacco.

(Continued On Page 108)

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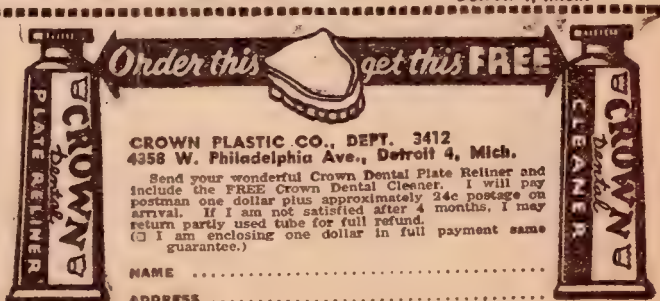

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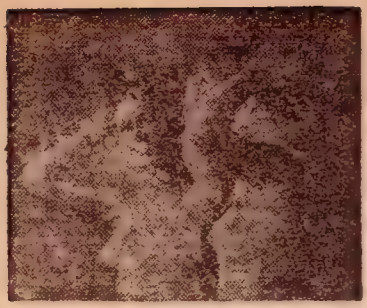

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(Continued From Page 106)

Swenson has built a ditch that runs within twenty feet of that fissure; we could open the head-gate and fill the ditch."

"An' then what?"

"We'll block the ditch, right opposite the fissure. Then we'll break the bank and dig a shallow ditch to the crack in the cliff. When we open the head-gate the water'll run right into the crack."

"That'd drown them out," grunted Tobacco. "If that shaft runs at a down-angle into the cliff, it'll start filling up from the back. That'll sure get the rats out of there."

"We'll make some rain for them," vowed Judge Bates.

"We gotta get a shovel."

Old Swenson had left the country four years before, but he had left a broken-handled shovel in the toolhouse. Judge Bates handed the shovel to Tobacco.

"Why give it to me, Bates? What's wrong with you diggin'?"

"Got a touch of lumbago," grunted the judge.

Tobacco's glance held suspicion. "That attack came rather sudden, didn't it?"

"That's the way they all come."

Grumbling, Tobacco went to work. The digging was hard, and sweat showed on his forehead. The ditch grew slowly behind him. Then the judge took the shovel. Finally the ditch reached the fissure. The judge sniffed the smoke that issued from it.

"Burnin' scrubpine."

Tobacco asked, "What now, Judge?"

"We have to open the head-gate, then we got to make a fast trip down the cliff. That water's really going to rip into that crack. We got to be down there to surprise Martin when he comes out of the tunnel."

The head-gate had been sealed down by settling mud. They raised it by using the shovel as a lever. Water began to trickle through the mud and run into the ditch. The judge and Tobacco waited no longer.

Shotguns in hands, they hurried down the cliff. They slid in talus; shale ground under their boots. Wild rosebushes tore at their cloth-

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 108)

ing, but they paid scant heed to these impediments. Panting, they hid in the brush, there by the tunnel's mouth. Tobacco looked upward.

"There's water runnin' over the cliff, Judge."

"That new ditch is probably leaking some, Tobacco. I'll bet the water is sure roaring down that crack. Listen!"

Men were hollering inside the tunnel. They heard the scuffle of shod hoofs. A heavy voice—the voice of Martin—cut through the noise.

"Get outa here, men, or we'll drown! Grab your broncs—"

The rest was lost in the roar of hoofs. The gang was on the exit. The judge glanced at Tobacco. Tobacco's face was pale, his lips strained. The judge knew a tinge of fear. How many men were in that shaft? If there were too many—

Judge Bates relaxed suddenly. Four riders came thundering out of the tunnel. He and Tobacco stepped into view, shotguns ready. Martin flanked his bronc, his riders around him, and stared at them.

"Judge Bates an' Tobacco Jones! What are you two doin' out here—?"

"We're makin' a little rain," said the judge. "We're taking up where your two-bit partner left off. We just sent a few tons of water into that shaft, Martin."

"How'd you know we was in there?"

"Hipshot Johnson told us about you outlaws. He killed your pal, Smith. You ain't robbin' no more banks, Martin. You're goin' to jail and standin' trial with Jed Harkins, the Pinkerton man, testifying against you. And with me for judge!"

Martin smiled crookedly. "Hell of a chance I'd have. . .even if I was innocent." He sent a sharp glance over his gunmen. They were ready, their hands on holstered guns. "There's four of us, Bates, an' only you two!"

HIS gun came out. The hammer fell. Then, suddenly, he dropped his gun, clawing at his belly. The judge's slug had broken him in

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 110)

two. Martin screamed, dropped from leather.

Already, Judge Bates' scattergun covered another longrider. Tobacco Jones was on one knee, smoke trailing from his shotgun. And a Martin man, limp and dead, lay in a heap, ten feet away. Elation flooded the judge. Elation that died when the two remaining killers, instead of fighting it out, hurriedly raised their hands.

"Hold that fire, Bates!"

The judge's smile was forced. Inside, he was weak, shaky. He spoke tonelessly to Tobacco.

"Get their guns. I'll hold them under my barrel."

Tobacco collected. Soon they were riding toward Cowtrail, two dead men tied to horses, two outlaws trussed to their saddles. Dark clouds were rimming the western sky. Judge Bates studied them and smiled.

"Looks like rain, Tobacco."

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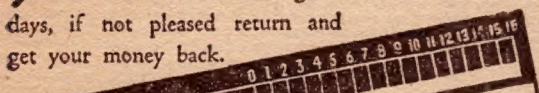

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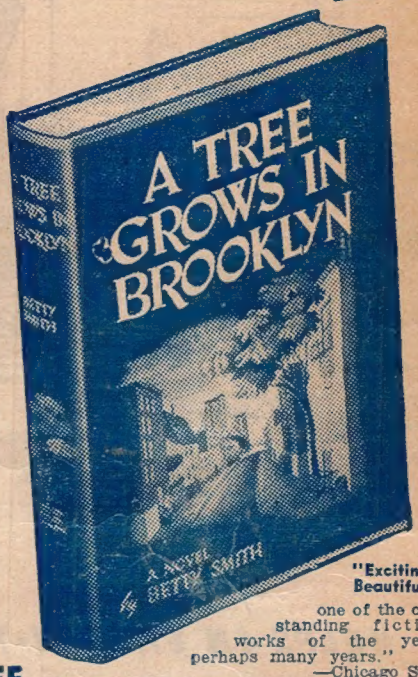

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Doubleday One Dollar Book Club
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